

# TIME WARPS

C. WALSKE



# Shadows Under the Sun

by Fern Marder

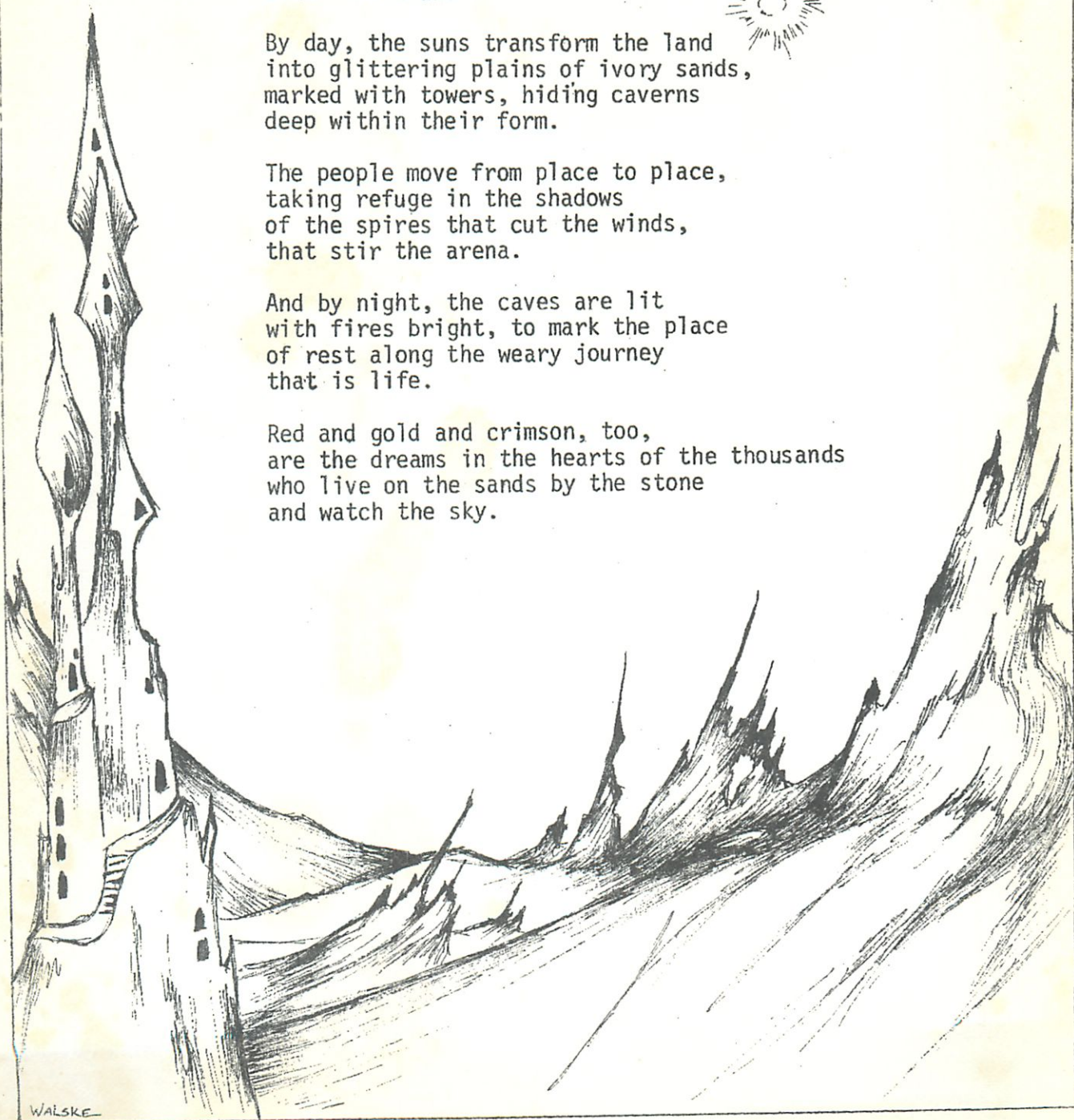
Red and gold and crimson hues,  
the land, a thousand years of stone  
reaching toward a sky of  
black obsidian.

By day, the suns transform the land  
into glittering plains of ivory sands,  
marked with towers, hiding caverns  
deep within their form.

The people move from place to place,  
taking refuge in the shadows  
of the spires that cut the winds,  
that stir the arena.

And by night, the caves are lit  
with fires bright, to mark the place  
of rest along the weary journey  
that is life.

Red and gold and crimson, too,  
are the dreams in the hearts of the thousands  
who live on the sands by the stone  
and watch the sky.



WALSKE



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This issue is respectfully dedicated to Devra, who started it all  
 Barbara, without whom it would not be.





It's 2:30 in the morning, ME-Con is due to start in seven hours, and I rather doubt this zine will be in the Dealer's Room until the second day of the Con. Once again I misjudged time needed for production and am working AFTER the last possible minute. (Well, at least this time around I estimated ((or, rather, Regina estimated)) the expenses more correctly and TW 4 should break even--the first Isis Press publication to do so. Maybe now we can start getting our back orders and what-not out!!)

Isis Press was originally founded because I wanted to prove that an attractive, nicely-balanced, good-reading fanzine could be produced at a reasonable cost. Well, we've done that. The only thing is, the method of reproduction chosen, though relatively inexpensive, is a HELL of a lot of work. So we are exploring the feasibility of several other methods of printing, hoping to find another method that combines quality of reproduction with reasonable costs. We have several possibilities in mind, but whether any of them will work out, only time will tell.

Meanwhile, rest assured--we will never chose the easiest, quickest, slickest, most expensive method of reproduction just to bring out something that is imprssive, but vastly overpriced. Zines are pricing themselves out of the market--and we don't intend to join the lemming parade.

The current issue is, I think, one of the best we've yet brought out. There are stories here that will amuse and delight you, anger you, thrill you, pleasure you, haunt you, sway you--in short, do everything but bore you. Do send us LOCs so that we can continue to produce zines that you want us to produce. We're beginning to plan the copy for several future issues right now, and would like some feed-back from you on this and past issues of TIME WARP.

What is in the future for Isis Press? TW 5/MIRROR WORLDS will be out winter '80-'81. It looks good. Authors lined up so far include:

Lois Welling, Bonnie Reitz, Barbara Wenk, Crystal Taylor,  
Karen Osman, Maggie Nowakowska, and more to follow...

Time (and Typewriter ribbons [mine is ready to quit any minute] --not to mention partners [Regina, stop that!!] and such) wait for no man...er, woman...er, person!



Anne has declared that, now that I am an editor, I must write an editorial. Now, you must understand--I do not write. I kibbitz, I add my two-cents' worth, I edit--but I do NOT write.

However, as I sit writing this, I am coming down from a "high" generated by a preview screening of THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK. It is great! Worth every minute we waited for it. The screening came courtesy of Linda Deneroff of GUARDIAN (and CBS News) who managed to "inherit" two tickets to a press screening--blessings on her!

The movie is exciting, visually stunning--and I can't wait to see it several more times. The characters have been allowed to grow. Life and the rebellion have progressed, and so have the Empire's "technological terrors". The Imperial "walkers" are possibly even more terrifying than the Death Star, simply because they are right there in front of you instead of some unseen object way off in space. When you see them coming toward the rebel lines, and the havoc they wreak on the troops manning those lines, the truth in a quotation from a TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH episode ("The Idolator") becomes clear:

"War wouldn't be so bad if it were only something happening to the other side."

Brig. Gen. Ed Britt, USAAF

There, Anne, consider that you have just finished reading my editorial debut.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Ed Britt", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.



# COMMUNICATIONS CONTROL

Maryann Walther  
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First off, a general comment (on TW #2): the repro is excellent, which not only makes the zine eminently easier to read than

some of those microscopically reduced fanzines, it also makes us humble artists happy at seeing our work so clearly and accurately rendered. The front cover is elegantly simple but eye-catching.

...As to the contents..., while I am not as heavily into STAR TREK as I used to be, I still enjoy a well-turned phrase on that particular subject, and TW2 certainly offered abundant good fan lit on that and other diverse subjects.

While the text of "Offshoot" was suitably Vulcan and nicely poetic, I'm not enamored of the Kraith universe.... The MRO Ludwig illo, however, is charming--simple, but very lovely. The young Spock is perfect and the younger Sarek is well-adapted. Bev Clark's "Meteor Made" again dealt with a subject (Kirk) outside my usual interest, but her images are finely painted and well-matched by Kathi Higley's art.

"The Quest" appealed to me for several reasons, the greatest one being I am a fan of Prince Valiant, Gawain, and all those wonderful archaic fellows of periods fanciful and historic; and secondly because Ms. Mosher managed an interesting tale dealing almost exclusively with that oft' neglected but potentially interesting inscrutable Oriental, Sulu. The crossing of dimensions is always a confusing subject (especially parallel ones that cross time as well), but Mosher kept every twist and turn pretty well sorted out. V.L. Smith's illos are appropriate--I especially liked the one with the castle and the title illo. And speaking of Ms. Smith, her Adama for the hauntingly beautiful "Elegy" is one of the nicest I've seen of the Great White Commander.

...V.L. Smith's "Song for a Kraith Dancer"... (has) solemn music and an impressive set of images to her verse.... (There's) a lot of better-than-average poetry in TW2. Bev Clark's poem to Bones is another winner--not just appropriate metaphors and a proper tinge of McCoy's speech pattern, but

a universal truth as well. Less impressive, but accompanied by a fine illo by Kathi Higley which somehow elevates the poem to something more of a gut reaction, is Sarah Liebold's "He Bleeds!" ... "The Fiery Void" fit well with "Bones"; ...Bev has a good feel for Scotty's speech pattern and her images are lovely. ...It's a definite plus for your zine that you found all these works of such quality on the secondary ST characters.

..."The Outsider" falls into the same delightful category as "The Quest", though in a more serious vein. It's nice to see Christine in a valid, non-simpering, important role. This Spock reminded me somehow of one of Carol Walske and Fern Marder's Klingons--maybe it's the noble barbarian syndrome. I couldn't follow the convolutions and parallels of the story, or quite figure out whether it was meant to be another time-line, an alternate universe, or some kind of landing party foul-up that turned rather permanent. No matter. That kind of cranial confusion makes for good cranial exercise.

"Rite of Passage" passed me right by. Neither the art nor the text ever rose above above the grade C level for me. Perhaps the character development of those poor ill-fated, non-human cadets was not sufficient, perhaps Kirk-forging-through-the-desert turns me off, whatever. Also, I've seen better artwork from Randy Ash.... Oh, well. Every story can't be perfect.

I really enjoyed Carrie Rowles's "Ruth and Naomi"! Rowles has that fluid linear style and fanciful humor that often characterizes Hans Dietrich. Her figures, though simple, flow with movement, and the backgrounds are detailed and complete compliments to her figures. Let's see more of her work!

...Thank you for giving me the chance to read ..."Brothers"! ...I like Fern Marder and Carol Walske's style and find their universe well-wrought. "Brothers" provided a welcome introduction to the Roan Morgan stories I later read in *Nu Ormenal Collected, Vols. 1 and 2*, which might have confused me otherwise.



...Pat O'Neill's "Hazardman" is a fine adventure in the venerable tradition of Batman, Gary Seven, the New Avengers (or the old, for that matter), and U.N.C.L.E. I liked the nice, bold comic art style, the character was a sympathetic but strong fellow with a good sense of humor, and the action moved well. I'd be willing to read some more Hazardman adventures.

So there you have it: my monster LOC to compliment your zine of equally king-sized proportions--and excellent quality. As I said before, I'll anxiously await the SWARS ish. If TW2, which dealt with subjects of marginal interest to me, could hold my attention so effectively, I expect to be no less than enthralled by TW3, which is on my favorite fantasy east of Tatooine...

\*

Elizabeth Carrie  
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I got my copy of TW2. You really gave money's worth with that! I have mine in a plastic bag because the staples came apart as soon

as I started reading it. No complaint--just meant it was that big an issue.

If Barbara Wenk is insane to think TW is a good zine, then you'll have to add me to the list. Funny thing--as fat as TW2 is, there wasn't enough. You know what I mean--after such an absence, I can't get enough.

After a desert of nothing, suddenly there are ((Trek)) books everywhere, as well as The Movie and its novelization. But I still like the amateur stuff best. I guess there's no pleasing me.

\*

Edith Crowe  
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I don't have time for a proper LOC, but I'd just like to say that on the whole TW2 looked very impressive, particularly "The Amalthea Chronicles"--but how can

you miss with Eileen Roy and V.M. Wyman? "Hazardman", on the other hand, gave me a large pain. If that's a new departure (for ST zines), I'd say it's in the wrong direction.

\*

Karen Osmen  
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I just got my copy of TW3, and I must say my first reaction was surprise; my second was to feel flattered, and

a little embarrassed, at being included in the contents. I haven't had too much contact with fanzines, and had thought of them as rather amateurish. TW convinced me otherwise: it was really good, even great. The quality of the writing was as good as anything commercial, and the ideas expressed had a lot more individuality and vigor than most commercial SF because the writers didn't feel the necessity to tailor their work to some real or imagined standard of "saleability." Art-

work was nice, and I got a kick out of the cartoons. The mix of subjects in the contents was very well balanced.

As to the stories, my own favorites were "The Cinninnatus Caper" (this is not to be considered verbal payola; it is my Honest Opinion) and "Cats in the Dark"; of the poems, "The Challenge" and "Soliloquy".... One of the things I like about fan fiction is that it can be self-indulgent. People can write the stories they would like to read, without having to please anyone else. If the idea strikes an answering chord in someone else, it is satisfying, but not a requirement.

"The Cinninnatus Caper" I liked because it was simply an all-around... good story: lively, well-written (capturing the verbal style of a character in first person to the satisfaction of other Han Solo fans' inner ear has got to be a real achievement), with a plot that drags you along with it. It was an honest story, which didn't bend the original characters out of shape, but used them to create a new reality which meshed perfectly with the Lucas universe.

"Cats in the Dark" I liked for entirely different reasons. It was obviously somebody's fantasy, and reminded me of innumerable identical tales I have been subjected to staring Kirk, or Spock, or Rhett, or, well, you name it--or rather, him. Undoubtedly, many readers will heap it with scorn, but I found it charming in its obviousness, largely because (of course) it has been my fantasy too--now and then. The level of writing saves it from the embarrassing painfulness of most of the similar efforts I have read.

"The Challenge" captures the Miltonic quality of Vader's revolt. "Soliloquy", though I doubt Han would be so introspective, says a lot about the inevitable failure of romantic idealism, along with the wistful desire we all have to wish that it could just be true.

To touch briefly on the theme of "Cats in the Dark", et al: I suppose you have read Kottak's article on "Social Science Fiction" in *Psychology Today* (February 1978) which discusses STAR WARS's archetypes and mythical aspects. In relation to the less respectable topic of women's sexual responses, it has been rather refreshing to see that I am not the only one who had this reaction to the image of Darth Vader. A friend of mine...dismissed the male leads with the comment, "Luke is Cute, but Han is Sexy." Hardly profound, but it sets up a sort of continuum which, if Luke is on one end and Han is in the middle, would put Vader at the opposite end. Luke is pure as the driven snow, with all the wicked thrill of vanilla custard, and hence uninteresting as a sex object to anyone over the age of twelve. Han has a good deal more sophistication in his experience, although his conduct as shown in the movie is also virtually asexual. He has the childishness demanded by a macho self-image, and you almost expect to see a rifle rack attached to the cabin wall of the *Millennium Falcon*, and hear a tape-player running country music. It is symptomatic of our culture that Han's sexual being is communicated to the audience through his attitude toward violence, and symptomatic of the subliminal influence of these cultural



stereotypes--which most women today would deny consciously--that we react on cue.

Vader, at the other extreme, has little or nothing of the underlying playfulness we see in Han. He is not childlike in any way; he is an adult. He has dignity and a capacity for tragedy which Han lacks, but he shares with him, in purer form, an independence of will, an image of power, and a control of violence. If Han is Big Brother, Vader is Father; our reaction is Oedipal--or, to be more accurate, Electra-like (there must be a proper adjective?). Vader's sexual attraction seems to be related to the attraction of rape fantasies (note that it is *fantasy only*), the desire to be mastered by someone. But with Vader, we can allow this unliberated impulse to come close to the surface because, in addition to being brutally powerful, he is admirable for many positive qualities: courage, intelligence, coolness in crisis, decisiveness, and so on. (I will add that neither Vader nor Han would probably be all that satisfying a partner in real life.)

\*

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Thank you for putting me on to Pegasus 3 and 4, and Skywalker 3. I've become an overnight

SWARS ((fan fiction)) fan.

I enjoyed TW3. The SW/Dragonriders of Pern unification is very clever, and the "rubber ducky" cartoon was a riot. "The Cinninnatus Caper" was a good explanation for Han's relation to Jabba. The only problem seems to be why Jabba wanted Han--his skills as a pilot or whatever reason was too evident ((sic)) in the story.

"Cats in the Dark" makes Darth too human. First, I can't believe he could be taken prisoner, and second, a personal relationship seems too far-fetched. There was no feeling of over-powering evil in this Vader--which was probably Joyce's point.

"Souvenirs of Alderaan" started off well--just like Han to be a bit gruesome about his profit base. But Aithne was a bit too cute even for me, although her precocity does help make Leia more explainable.

"A Tale of Two Lukes" was funny. I can just see Luke having a fit about being portrayed as a hero and losing the argument because he was embarrassed about Leia.

\*

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You wanted LOCs, so here's one, anyway.

Of the poetry in TW3 I liked best "Before the Fall", "The Challenge", "Desert Winds, Dying Winds", and "The Jedi Master". The first two and the last seemed to reflect quite accurately the characters of the people they were supposed to be about/by,

and "Winds" had a certain shivery something about it that made it peculiarly effective.

"A Tale of Two Lukes" is, as usual, of the typical high Nowakowska quality, and particularly enjoyable because it makes sense that Luke would, sometimes, be a little confused about the changes in his life and in himself.

"Cats in the Dark" was intriguing and slightly scary, with its picture of Vader's mutilations and his utter dependence on his lifesupport at even the most intimate times.

I liked "Souvenirs of Alderaan", especially Aithne; precocious though she may be, you see so little of very young people in SWARS fanfic that her very presence makes her unique. I would like to see another appearance of this character.

"Cinninnatus Caper" captured Han's thought and speech patterns very well, and its first-person style, which so few people attempt, more than made up for the lack of action in it. And I loved the "Pern Meets the Empire" cartoons!

\*

Chris Callahan  
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Got TW3...and had to make some comments.

First, I love Colleen Winters's work and am glad to see her cartoons here. Maybe I'm prejudiced because she's a friend, but I think her contributions are the best artwork in the zine. I've seen Smith, Kowalski, and Martynn elsewhere--Smith and Kowalski are OK but not up to what they've done in other zines.

The poetry seems about on a par with other SWARS poetry I've read, better than some, not as good as others. The Jedi philosophy is nothing new--rather trite, in fact--but nice calligraphy.

The best story is Nowakowska's "Tale of Two Lukes". I've enjoyed her work in *Skywalker*, and look forward to seeing more of her. That little dig at the loathsome Hildebrandt poster was lovely. The Whills are a fascinating invention, and I am entirely sympathetic with the Jedi, Han, Luke, etc. Brilliant story-tellers they may be, but they have got to be the most irritating creatures imaginable! I like Nowakowska's sense of humor, and handling of the three main characters.

"The Cinninnatus Caper" on the other hand--In the first place, the language of the narration just isn't Han. The dialogue is all right, but the narrative sounds downright unnatural--for anybody, much less Han Solo. Jabba the Hut seems overdone, somehow. Setting him up with a location, security and second-in-command worthy of an Imperial governor doesn't feel right. It's most unlikely the Empire would allow a criminal to maintain such a setup anyway. And describing Greedo as a toad doesn't fit with his appearance in the movie. The whole story just feels wrong. The basic idea is fine, but the treatment doesn't make it. Chewie is well-handled though.



The end of "End and Beginning" was a bit too much--"son" indeed! "Cats in the Dark"--well, I've ((sic)) heard of the existence of "Lay DARTH" stories but this was the 1st I came across (found a couple more since then). It does make a fairly creditable effort at humanizing Vader, but not only is the plot rather silly, the writing isn't very good. Ditto "Souvenir of Alderaan". "After the Revolution" seems diametrically opposed to the spirit of Lucas' story and characters.

Paula Block's review of "STAR WARS Holiday Special" was interesting. I agree with her on the redeeming features, tho ((sic)) I'd estimate a bit less than the hour she gave as worthwhile.

\*

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...I'm not very good at LOCs. I get no thrill from nit-picking and am not good at going on about what I like.

Angela's (poetry had) much in it I found well-put. I tend to disagree with the notions of personalizing the force, or 'submitting' one's self to it, but that's a personal opinion.

...The art was nice through out the zine. I liked the cutouts for "The Challenge".

I enjoyed the concept of "Cinninnatus Caper": that Han was suckered into his deeper career of crime. It's an interesting angle that bears more looking into. Am I correct in assuming (the author) was copying some old detective style in the construction?

...Seems I have quite a contrary reaction to ("Cats in the Dark") than most. Sometimes I wonder if all his fans aren't downgrading his intelligence and talent in their efforts to 'humanize' him.... I can picture a human being as bad as he quite easily.

"Souvenirs of Alderaan" had a number of nice things in it. The one thing I questioned was the personality of the heroine. Having been a precocious brat, used to adult companionship, I know that the usual presentations--which this story seemed to employ--are not so true to life. I liked (Aithne's) older relative, and got a kick out of the idea of Han mining Alderaan rocks.

I pretty much agreed with Paula Block on the SW special. Again though, something has to be really bad before I'll give up completely. (I'd vote for Boomer's ass over Starbuck's, but neither saved *Galactica* for me. White lurex angels, indeed!)

...Nice to see a clean zine. I don't really mind reduction, if you're taking a poll, especially if it means I get more stories. As for typos, from this letter you can see how good I am at them.

\*

Maryann Walther  
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As I found with TW2, #3 was well laid-out, a graphically clear, readable zine, all the more interesting to me because

of its STAR WARS theme. The cover is basic and eye-catching with its simplicity of line and its bold use of primary colors. Also, it's not a portrait of any one SWARS character, which nicely proclaims by unspoken choice the tendency of your zine to give everybody equal time--even if ye editors DO happen to prefer a certain Corellian... ((As to the bacovery,)) nice to see Walske lift pen on subjects other than her wonderful Kilingaven. Her Ben and Luke are a nice study in light and shadow. I'm not sure of the significance of the sun for anything other than decorative filler; if I'd have done it I would have put in two suns, at least, for Tatooine, or to symbolize Luke's kinship with the old General as a nascent Jedi.

I haven't read the McCaffrey books yet (or *Dune*. What kind of an SF fan am I, you may well ask? A busy one.), but Winters's cartoons were evocative enough to provide a basic amusement. Wonder how DARTH would take to tribbles?

...Fern's "Challenge" is a powerful dramatic monologue that portrays the Dark Lord as I prefer to imagine him--one who *knows* the light, yet consciously *chooses* to serve Darkness, an ancient evil, neither mad nor deluded, but corrupt to the core with a very rational purpose--a mighty and fearful enemy for even a Skywalker! Bravo!

..."Cinninnatus" read just as well the umpteenth reading as it did when you baited me with tantalizing excerpts at last ST Expo. Your first person narrative with Solo is, to my knowledge, unique to you and Susan Matthews, and you portray Han with skill--wary, cunning, possessed of a flip sense of humor and that fascinating (to any female but Antibe) sensuality. Your fastidious, worrywart Chewbacca is his big, loveable, incomprehensible self (Do you practice Wookiee dialect before you transcribe it? *That* I'd like to see--and hear!) and Jabba is a masterpiece of sheer evil grossity (the smell image is great!). I still like the irony of Han having to deal with a totally nasty female villain who doesn't melt at first encounter with Corellian charm. ...and of course, Ros's illos are wonderful--especially her Han in every aspect, fore and aft (a Han in the buff is a *jo!* forever), and her grooming Chewie. Made me fall in love with those two charming rogues all over again! ...all in all, a fine prequel.

...Yas's "Cats in the Dark" puts one right in the center of the action from the first wheeze to the last. Only Joyce could write a lay-scene with Vader and get away with it without it being ludicrous. And considering her fascination with the Dark Lord, Yas admirably resisted the temptation to turn him into a noble outcast. He remains formidable to the end, performing "good deeds" (saving Kass) only out of sheer necessity and logic. Kass I liked: her self-preservation is her key. She's no Mary Sue. She cottons up to the Sith purely to save herself, and her presence of mind is merely remarkable, not super-human. Hans's illos, however, definitely *are* superb. She captures that leery "What the hell am I doing here?" look for Kass, and that poor Imperial





lackey who opens the TIE hatch looks properly non-plused. It's kind of strange to see Vader unknked, but it does show the details on his suit well.

"Souvenirs of Alderaan" was, I am afraid, not exactly one of my favorites. Adsit's poem at the beginning is the best part--lovely images there, and the irony of turning and reducing a living, breathing world into a lifeless hunk of a paper-weight is thought-provoking. Even the beginning of the story with Han spacewalking isn't bad, but with the appearance of the kid and the old man the tale degenerates into a cutesy clone of SWARS with a touch of the old Mary Sue. Does *everybody* speak Wookiee? I doubt it. And I doubt Little Red and Co. would be able to bat about the systems so freely during what amounts to a wartime situation. And I suspect the Alderaan area would have some kind of Imperial surveillance lurking about. Also, I don't see Solo warming to Red and Co. (or Chewie doing it either) quite so readily. Giving Uncle Han a kissy was a bit much. Guess I like my Corellians a bit rougher....

Varesano's poetry I've encountered in other zines and my usual reaction held here--beautifully cast (and delightfully calligraphed by Whitfield), but just a shade too metaphysical to hold my interest; I prefer to read of Jedi in action, rather than in meditation, but that's an entirely personal bent. Kelly's "Before the Fall" is a favorite of mine--and you should hear the folk tune that goes with it. Great! ...For sheer oppressive forboding and excellent style, I liked Liebold's "Desert Wind", and the moody, beautifully textured desert-scape by Waters. This poem made me feel the horror and unexpected doom of Luke's aunt and uncle just with that fateful last line more than any other descriptive passage I've read to date on the subject.

((Although it suffers by comparison to the other Vader piece)) I *did* like the mind-call of Kenobi ("Darth, my son!") at the end of "End and Beginning". After all, a saintly fellow like Kenobi *would* still care for his fallen pupil. Even when he was telling Luke of Darth's betrayal (the "How did my father die?" part of SWARS), it is

with a certain sadness rather than with bitter anger.

...Then there's "Soliloquy", another one of Matthews's gems of a dramatic monologue that reveals volumes about Han; his background, and his philosophy of life through his musings on Luke. Susan literally brings Han alive and airs the rounds of his cynicism--does the sun's heat have to melt *everyone's* wings? Did it melt his? She gives his background of utter joy, then, somehow, disillusionment, and finally his love of the *Fal-oon* and his brotherly affection for Luke. Sometimes I'd quibble with the use of archaic words ("carrack", "quean"); since Han's mouth lends itself more easily to "downport" jargon, but the speech flows so naturally, and the intonation is so apt, that it stands fine as written.

Of course, one of the main reasons I had to have TW3, besides "Cinninnatus", was to add "A Tale of Two Lukes" to my Thousand Worlds Chronicles collection. Maggie (and Pam) are again in peak form literarily and artistically in this slower paced, but amusing tale. The double point of view format is unique and diverting. Nice to get the lead-in story on the Whills after reading hints about them in other zines. I don't agree 100% with Maggie's Luke and Leia--particularly their rather free use of expletives (like "shit"), or Luke's rather smooth amorous advances. Of course, there's always the excuse that he picked all that up from exposure to Han (nice technique, unquestionably), and I'd much rather hear Leia swear occasionally than mouth an inadequate "Darn!" like she does in Alan Dean Foster's *Splinter of the Mind's Eye*.

My overall impression? Overwhelmingly positive. Keep cranking out those goodies.

\*

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First and foremost, a hurrah for Martynn, whose illos stand out even among the many fine artists who contributed to this number. My only real objection to the layout was the first grade-primer size of Allyson Whitfield's calligraphy for Angela-Marie Varesano's poetry. No criticism of the poetry or the calligraphy is intended when I declare the presentation of her work represented a lot of wasted space, as far as I was concerned. One practically had to set the zine on the far side of the room in order to read a page properly. Please consider respectful reduction in the future. Your covers were very nice, especially the color front.

...I think TW3 got a nice balance in its poetry in this ish, but I feel odd discussing the poems in the zine--one was *my* contribution this time.

"Knight and Dragon" ...by Rebecca Greenberg deserves special mention. The care that went into it is reflected in the development of the metaphor, and I appreciated the fact that Rebecca put that kind of work into her poem.



The "Cinninnatus Caper" was a well-told story, and the use of the first-person Corellian POV made for an interesting innovation. The characterization of Han perhaps suffers a little, since we don't find out anything about him but what he tells us; but that's hardly a fault of major magnitude, as Han has a strong and well-developed *persona* in this story despite my little quibble. And Jabba attained some real stature as a villain, instead of simply being a foil for a smart-ass Solo.

...I did not much care for "Cats in the Dark". This is not a fault with the writing, which in itself is quite good. We are all for "infinite variety" of opinion within fan-networks, and I imagine it's basically frowned upon for one to object to a nicely done story on the basis of premise; but still, be we as liberal as we like, there can be room for only a certain amount of "give" in some of our conceptualizations. (Aiee!! I'm speaking governmentese!) And Joyce's Vader is simply "out-of-bounds" as far as *my* idea of Lord Vader goes. Sure, it's a cute story. Sure, Joyce's Vader is as valid as anyone else's. But I can't see it. I don't like Vader. He is not a nice person, and I wouldn't care to be in the same *city* as Lord Vader, let alone the same *bed*. By my lights, the premise is ludicrous. And why would a "fan" of Darth Vader want to show him so weak, so pathetic as this? I don't buy it, either on the basis of the script and the book or on the basis of the dramatic conventions Lord Vader represents. In my opinion. Now, I do not consider my opinion to represent the "only" or the "real" or the "right" idea. It is, however, *my* idea, and Joyce--although, as I said, the story was well-done and perhaps believable enough given its premise--has not changed my mind. (My old Commander once said I had a mind like a steel trap. And once it snaps shut, boy...) Hans's illo of Kass and Lord Vader, with the Imperial official trying to be official, is delightful.

"Souvenirs of Alderaan" ran some fairly obvious risks of being ridiculed for some of its elements, but ran them courageously and I rather enjoyed it.

In "A Tale of Two Lukes" I especially enjoyed the by-play between Luke and the Whills, and the grandiose Whillish diction. (Maggie wrote that before she even met me--and *already* she was teasing me...)

All right. I confess it. My Very Favorite Thing in the whole zine was "After the Revolution" by Karen Osman.

There's the sum of my comments on TW3. I thought that, all in all, and my personal prejudices aside, the quality of the prose work was quite high, and the zine would have been well worth its cost--and more. (I say "would have been" 'cause I managed to ~~exactly~~ wrangle a contributor's copy. Heh!)

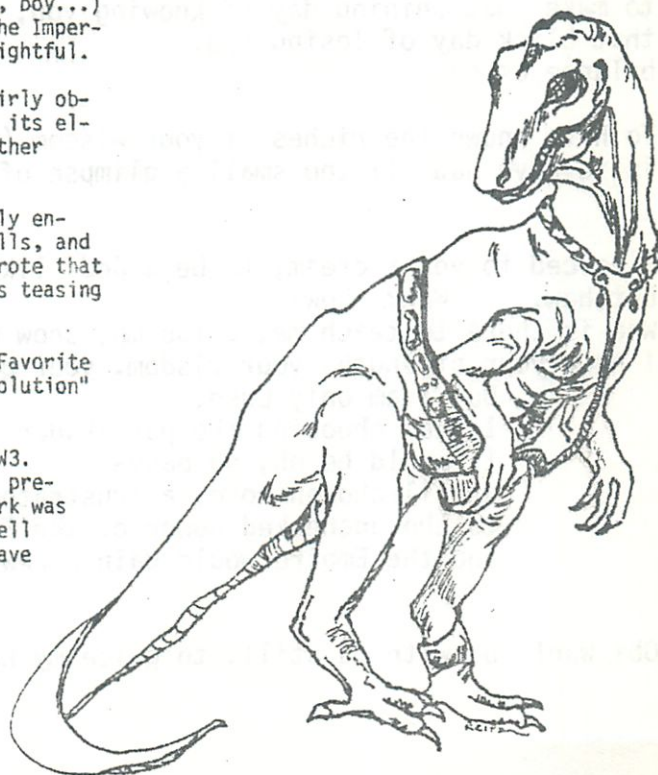
you get them. I feel the potential for using the imagination is so much greater in SWARS fiction than in STREK! In STREK, fans feel they must stick to the aired show and the same unchanging characters, and that gets to be so boring--we've been doing the same stories over and over now for ten years. I frequently get the feeling that Kirk and Co. are operating in a vacuum--and I don't just mean space. Your "Cytherean Cycle" (TW1) is a nice branching out to other characters and is an introduction to more background than ever we saw on the TV screen. I am eagerly looking forward to more of that, too. Wish there were more such series and stories. Hey! It's a big universe out there!!

Back to TW3: It's impossible to say which story I liked the best, because I liked all of them. I could particularly point with enjoyment to "Souvenirs of Alderaan" with its wide view of the Empire, and to "Cats in the Dark" for the same reason--and for its underlying humor. (On the subject of the latter, after reading Caro Hedge's zine (*The Lighter Side of the Force?*)), I'm not surprised she'd get such a wacky idea--nor that Joyce would pick it up and use it so well.)

Anyway, I loved all the stories, although I could have done without all that poetry.

By the way--the staples keep coming out. You need a heavier duty commercial stapler or a smaller zine.

\*



Cathy Czene  
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I loved TW3. I  
hope you do more  
SWARS pieces as



# PROLOGUE

Was it but one day, Obi Wan?  
One day of grandeur, of faith and promise,  
to change my life?  
It seems I've known you always, been with you always,  
learned from you ever.  
Yet it was but a day, Obi Wan.  
One day in which the course of my life was set.

Obi Wan: friend, teacher, guide, protector.

Was it for this you waited in the desert, revered one?  
To pass on the sword of knowledge?  
I hope, in turn, to pass it on unsullied and undimmed  
to those who come after,  
remembering always that it is only because of *you*,  
Obi Wan, that there shall even be...an after.  
I saw your eyes in that final moment. I saw you smile.  
With the same proud dignity  
with which you faced voluntary exile to the Jundland wastes,  
you faced death--or something more--  
and bought for your pupil life--and an eternal debt.

Payment of that debt lies still ahead, Obi Wan,  
to make that shining day of knowing you,  
that black day of losing you,  
balance as one.

To have known the riches of your wisdom (oh, so briefly!)  
is to have had all too small a glimpse of glory.

I voiced to you a dream, to be a Jedi like my father.

But how, Obi Wan? How?

Who is there to teach me, guide me, show me the way?

I need your strength, your wisdom, your grace.

But I am only Luke.

I fear choosing the path Vader took.

It would be oh, so easy--

an ill-chosen word, a frustrated moment, an instant's surrender  
to the unchecked power of the Force--  
and the Empire would gain a new lieutenant.

Obi Wan! Be with me still, to guide my hand, my mind, and my heart!

Anne Elizabeth Zeek  
December 1977.



# "FATE IS THE NAME..."

by Dyane Kirkland



A  
Thousand Worlds  
Chronicles  
Story

*The Wookiee race, as a rule, is not given to thinking. Members spend their time in social contact with the rest of their tribe, and in food-gathering. Very occasionally, they will call a council to determine solutions to problems they cannot handle as individuals. Such a council had been called now...*

"He's just a pup," Byarnan, Chewbacca's father, told the council apologetically. "He has not yet met twenty-five summers. That is why he wishes to fight."

The older Wookiees gave Chewbacca unfriendly stares. The leader spoke: "We have never before fought back against the slavers. To do so now would destroy our people."

"They are already being destroyed," Chewbacca said patiently, but with emphasis.

"Now they take only a few at a time. If we fight, they will kill us all," the leader answered with less patience than the youngster. "You have given us good ideas before. The hiding places for the young and for food storage were good ideas. But this is a different matter. It is beyond your experience. We will not fight."

Chewbacca tried desperately to convince the council that their only hope was self-defense. He fought from personal conviction. He had just turned fourteen summers when his uncle was taken by slavers. His mother died in a later raid, his older sister's child also. How could the council not see--but the council members thought him a fool. And his father was a coward.

In mixed sorrow and anger, Chewbacca left the meeting. He prowled restlessly, unable to return to the family cave area. He came at last to a large clearing by the river. He made a nest and spent a restless night, unfamiliar thoughts jostling each other in his mind. The growls, churples, and wheeps of a jungle morning found him still

awake. The problem of convincing the council that he was right seemed insurmountable.

The jungle around him became suddenly quiet, as if listening. Far away he could hear the sounds of an engine. Standing up, he sniffed the air and snorted with disgust. Something that burned fuel had added a rancid, oily odor to the usual jungle scents. Slavers?? A tradeship?? Should he go back to the village? He stood uncertain a moment--long enough to hear the cries from the direction of his home. A slaveship! Climbing into a nearby tree, he lay quietly among the leaves and waited. Perhaps the slavers would not come this way...

Sounds of running reached his ears. From the sound of it, the leader was a small Wookiee. The followers were humans, blundering along noisily and yelling to each other. Chewbacca stayed hidden in his tree. The elders hadn't listened to him; there was nothing he could do now, alone.

The running Wookiee crashed into the clearing. She was limping and running slowly. Behind her came three humans dressed in coveralls and carrying clubs and strange weapons. They reached the tree in which Chewbacca had sought refuge before they overtook the female. They beat her to the ground and began to drag her back toward the village. Chewbacca forgot his intention to stay hidden. This was a female. The People needed her....

He roared in anger and flung himself from the tree toward the slaving party. He was on them before they could fire their weapons. The clubs were no good at such short range and the men were no match for the young Wookiee. One human crumpled, then another, before the third pulled a short weapon from his belt and fired. Chewbacca fell unconscious.

When he woke, it was to the rhythmic whine of an engine. The stench of burning fuels, human



odors, and the mingled smells of fear-sweat, blood, and feces from the Wookiees assailed him.

Shaking his head to clear it, Chewbacca adjusted his jungle-trained eyes to the lack of light. He was scraped and bruised, but nothing was broken. The depression he felt because of his surroundings, his situation, was worse than any physical hurt.

Wishing for fresh air, Chewbacca looked for windows, but was disappointed. There was one door--a sealed hatch near the corner of the bulkhead. He tried to sit up, but was unable to.

What--?

He raised his head and looked at himself. Manacles! He was chained! He tried to fight his bonds, but the strange human metal was stronger than he. Spent, he looked around his prison. Sleep-shelves were stacked from floor to ceiling, from wall to wall, in this one cell alone. A Wookiee lay on each shelf. And everyone knew how big slaver ships were. How many--

His fellow prisoners were all sizes, male and female, and ranged from pups no more than four summers--of course. They would not take the infants. They die too easily--to fully mature adults of more than 125 years. Some were wounded, many dazed. Several of the females had obviously been wrested from their new-borns: their breasts were painfully swollen with milk.

The young male on the sleep-shelf next to him seemed alert. Chewbacca waited patiently for him to look his way.

"Are you from the tribe of the hills?" Chewbacca asked.

The young male nodded. "You are from the river tribe. My tribe has traded with yours often."

"Yes, I remember." Chewbacca looked around. "I can hardly believe it has happened. I told the elders only yesterday they should fight."

"They should have. I would have," the young Wookiee answered. "I was caught in the healing caves, recovering from sickness. I was netted before I even saw them."

"I tried to fight, but I could not do it alone," Chewbacca said with a sigh. "If only the elders had listened."

"What will happen to us," the other asked. "I have heard stories...."

"We have all heard the stories," Chewbacca said. "They geld the males, except for a few, and force the females to breed from selected stock. It's true, at least in part, of that I am sure."

"The stolen ones never return."

"No. Once they have learned to live with men they cannot return. They must live with men forever. Or so the elders say."

"Where are they taking us?" the younger male wanted to know. "The stories never say."

"I don't know," Chewbacca said. "Where ever it is, it cannot be a very good place, if many men are there."

"I don't want to be a slave. I want my children to be free."

"I don't like the idea either," Chewbacca said grimly.

The two Wookiees looked at each other for a moment, then looked around. The young female that Chewbacca had tried to help lay in a back corner, blood dried on her fur. Her staring eyes were blank. None of the other Wookiees appeared interested in their surroundings.

"We can't fight them, just the two of us," Chewbacca said at last.

"I will not be a slave. I will die first." The young Wookiee slammed one fist into the wall next to his bunk for emphasis. The impact echoed in the hold.

"You will die if you try to fight. Perhaps if we stay together and learn something about them first...."

"I will not live among men. They are evil," the youngster said with finality.

Chewbacca shrugged. "I will not throw my life away so cheaply. I wish to learn more of them, so I can save our people from them."

The younger Wookiee shifted uncomfortably in his chains. "Your tribe is strange, that you can talk of such things. But there is no blood oath between us. You need not fight with me. I ask only to die."

Chewbacca could find nothing to say to that, and the younger male appeared satisfied. Chewbacca fell into a weary, hopeless, sleep.

When he woke, his senses told him it was more than a day since he had first awakened in the hold. While he slept, his chains had been slackened enough for him to reach his mouth. He turned his head. A piece of melon and a large jug of water had been set near him.

Weak with hunger, Chewbacca reached for the food. The fruit was over-ripe, the water flat tasting, but neither seemed drugged. As the dizziness subsided and his strength returned, Chewbacca glanced again at the captives around him. These Wookiees didn't need food or water, or even the sweetly-scented, sandy-floored healing caves. They needed their freedom. But it seemed only death could bring them that.

There were several additional feedings, but at very irregular intervals. Without the natural light of the sun, or the smell of the tangy



river breezes, or the scent of the early dew drying in the scorching summer sun, Chewbacca became disoriented and lost track of time. The melon rinds were left where they fell and gave off a sickly sweet smell as they rotted. The ammonia-ripe stench of urine combined with the foul odor of feces and vomit. Over all hung the acrid smells of blood and sweat.

Moans from the chained Wookiees came more frequently as wounds became infected from lack of care and exposure to filth, but some of the Wookiees lay disturbingly still. Chewbacca tried to close his mind to the suffering he could not cure.

Chewbacca was awake when the sounds of the ship's engines died to a low rumble. The hill-tribe Wookiee was awake too, and several others he could see by turning his head.

"You are going to fight them?" Chewbacca asked the younger male.

"Yes."

"Good hunting, then."

"I wish you would fight with me, but I cannot ask you to," the young male said, cocking his head at the sound of the docking retros. "We would die free."

"That is an answer for us only. We should try to find a way to keep men from stealing our people. We can do that only by learning about them."

"To live among humans, gelded like some kind of pet, is not what I want from life," the youngster said hotly.

"True," Chewbacca said patiently, "but they are short-lived, and they are clever. We can learn from them, and we will outlive them."

A sound of scraping metal came from the hatchway, and the young Wookiee tensed. "Good-bye, and good hunting," he said as the latch was pulled.

"And you, good hunting," Chewbacca said, watching the door expectantly. The door opened. Chewbacca blinked at the light. As his eyes adjusted he saw several grim-faced, cruel-eyed humans armed with prods and strange weapons enter the prison-room. They began to release the Wookiees and push them out the door.

A fur-raising howl echoed through the hold as the young hill Wookiee, freed of his chains, leaped forward, crushing bones and snapping with fangs at any exposed surface. At last someone was able to blast him with a hand weapon. Even as he died he was reaching for more human flesh.

The remaining humans stepped over and around the dead Wookiee and the four crewmen who had fallen with him. They continued to unload the rest of the cargo.

There was a stir at the door and three new humans entered the room. They were different somehow, but Chewbacca could not tell in what way. Then he saw the eyes of the one in the lead: they were not cruel, but rested on the chained Wookiees with compassion.

These were the first humans Chewbacca had ever seen close-up and he watched with interest as they examined his fellow captives. The one who seemed to be in the lead made comments in his incomprehensible man-talk and gave orders to the two assistants with him and to the crew-members still on their feet after the hill Wookiee's abortive attack.

At last he reached Chewbacca. He had him released and watched as he stood on legs shaky from lack of exercise. Finally he nodded. He looked up and met the Wookiee's eyes directly. "Hello," he said in Kazeel, Chewbacca's native language.

Warily, Chewbacca grunted an answer.

"I am a doctor, a healer-of-those-who-are-ill. You are well?"

"Is anything, in this place?" Chewbacca asked bitterly.

"No, I would say not." The man looked sadly at the bodies of the Wookiees and humans. "Will you come peacefully?" The Kazeel fell from his tongue with a flat sound and did not reverberate as it should have.

"I hate you for what you have done to my people," Chewbacca said.

"I can understand that," the man told him. "But if you fight, you will die; if you are peaceful now, you will live. Your life may change, but it will go on, if you give it a chance."

The exchange took some time because the man didn't speak Kazeel quickly. When he finally finished, Chewbacca considered his words, then shrugged. The doctor smiled.

"Follow me and do not show anger. Perhaps there is a way to help you."

Without a sound, Chewbacca followed the doctor from the ship's hold. Outside the air was filled with man-smells, but at least it was much cleaner, fresher, and cooler than in the hold. Chewbacca sniffed the air, trying to quell his anxiety at the alien life forms the smells conjured up in his mind. He looked skyward and felt a moment of sheer panic; the reality of his situation was suddenly, painfully clear to him. This was not his sky, not his sun. It was too much after the trauma of his capture. He forced his attention from the sky and looked again at the doctor.

The healer had approached the man who seemed to be in charge of the slave crew, the one the other humans called "Captain". The doctor spoke sharply to this man. Chewbacca could not understand what the doctor said, but it seemed to make the other man furious. He reached for the



doctor. Chewbacca plucked the slaver from the ground. Despite the "captain's" yells for help, no one moved. Chewbacca had stopped the slaver from hurting the doctor, and so was content to stand and hold him until someone else took over.

"Thank you." The doctor smiled. "I think you can put the captain down now."

"Woroo?" Chewbacca asked. \*What?\*

"Oh." The doctor looked startled, then laughed as he translated his request into Kazeel. He laughed even harder as the red-faced slaver landed face down in the dust of the landing area.

At a sign from the doctor, Chewbacca followed him to a metal shape with a cage in the back. Inside the cage were beds, each with an unmoving Wookiee. Chewbacca grabbed the bars of the cage and stared at the Wookiees.

"Aarhro fuuurr?"

"No, they're not dead. And if I can keep them alive I will. Will you help?"

"Woroo?" Chewbacca had to ask once more.

"I keep thinking I'm talking to a human," the man said. He translated with some difficulty. The Wookiee watched him for a moment.

"Reuss," he said. \*Sure.\* He watched the doctor mount the metal shape and copied him. They moved off. Feeling uneasy, Chewbacca clutched the side of the vehicle all the way to the compound.

Chewbacca watched the unloading of the other Wookiees with interest. Unused to humans, he drew his own conclusions about the meaning of things around him. He had already decided on one thing: people who wore white jackets like the doctor's were friends, and people who did not were suspect, if not definitely enemies. When one of the healer's aides, also wearing a white coat, came to escort him to his assigned quarters, he went quietly.

The large room was clean and dry, with running water in a stone basin and a bin where the smell of fruit lingered. Off to the rear was a small room, like a little cave, where he could sleep and not be afraid of attack. The human left and Chewbacca padded around, sniffing and looking into every corner. Finally satisfied, he curled up and went to sleep.

A knock outside the chamber brought him instantly awake from a dreamless sleep. He growled threateningly at the intrusion, wishing for the clear air of the jungle, and not a wooden barrier that blocked his view.

"I wish to enter," a voice replied in Kazeel. It did not sound like the doctor.

Chewbacca crouched defensively. "Enter at your own risk."

The door swung open slowly and he faced another Wookiee, a fully mature male perhaps 100 summers older than he with russet fur. The other was wearing one of the white coats. He grinned at Chewbacca. "May I come in?"

"Oh. Yes, of course." Chewbacca stood up to allow him access to the back room if he wanted it. The older Wookiee sat down just outside it and motioned Chewbacca to be seated.

"I want to talk to you a little, and then I am to show you around," he said when the younger Wookiee was seated. "My name is Rowoonr, and my tribe comes from the Hhegr River Basin."

"I am Chewbacca, from the Kwagh River tribe," he told the adult. "Why are you wearing that white thing?"

"I work for the healer, and it is a symbol of his tribe," Rowoonr said. "He wants me to ask you if you will join his tribe."

"Why?" Chewbacca asked. "He has you."

"Well, perhaps because there are many Wookiees here. Let me tell you something: those men who raid the villages are not members of any tribe. They are outlaws."

Chewbacca could relate to that in terms of his own tribe, but one must be horrible indeed to be forced to be an outlaw. He said as much.

"Man tribes are different. They believe that any animal that is not as man is as stupid as a tree and is theirs to hunt or to play with or to kill. But some men do not agree. The doctor, the healer, is one of these. Wookiees are in his tribe, as well as men, and he keeps us safe, for he is powerful."

Rowoonr shook his head sadly and continued. "He is powerful, but he cannot stop the slave trade in Wookiees. The best we can do is make these outlaws treat the captives decently and try to make their lives more bearable. We heal the sick--"

"Who runs the man tribes and tells them to do these things?" Chewbacca interrupted. "He must be a strong chief if he cannot be stopped."

"He is strong and evil. He lives on another world. He has money and power and he is feared, for he is a killer of men as well as other animals. He is the leader of the outlaws and it is to him that the money goes for the sale of slaves. And he is not satisfied with just our people--even some kinds of men are made slaves to satisfy this outlaw chief."

"Who is he? Will I ever see him?" Wild notions of revenge filled Chewbacca's head. If he could kill the man-chief there would be no more slave-raids.

"It is not likely that you will ever see him," Rowoonr told him, "but you will come to know his name. He is Releth Deadmoon. His ship is his home and you will see it, sometimes, when you go



to the port. It carries the flag of this system, but it looks different from all the other ships that land here. It is called *Moonbreaker*, and has some kind of mighty power."

"It isn't right," Chewbacca grumbled.

Rowoonr agreed. "Most men are like, well --like most of our own people, both good and bad, but mostly good. The tribal council of men is called a Senate, and there are laws that say all beings must be treated with respect. But they are not all good, these men, in spite of their laws. Releth breaks the laws, and not even the Jedi Knights can stop him."

"What's a Je--Jedi--what you said?" Chewbacca wanted to know.

"Our tribes have nothing like it," Rowoonr said. "They work for all the tribes, but only for certain reasons. And there are as many man-tribes as there are stars in a night sky. They have special powers, these Jedi Knights, but they are always good."

The older Wookiee was silent a moment, then looked at the youngster with a warm light in his eyes. "Are you hungry, Chewbacca?"

The young Wookiee nodded, all thoughts of men and ships forgotten.

"Then let's find something to eat, and I'll show you around the place. You will live here, but you will work in the big part of the hospital with the rest of the healer's tribe."

"What's a --hospital?" Chewbacca asked, falling into stride with the older, larger Wookiee.

"Like the healing caves back home, only different. You will see," Rowoonr said. He turned down a smoothly paved hallway. "Learn the directions well, and you will be given the run of the place that much sooner."

The younger Wookiee looked around intently as he traversed the long hallways. Though each looked much like the last, he noticed many different smells and committed them to memory as best he could. He was there with an older member of his race who knew how to work with men; he should not have to fear anything.

The smells suddenly took a turn for the better--food! The older Wookiee grinned at his excitement.

"Found the kitchen, did you? Come, then, and eat." Opening a door, Rowoonr led the youngster into a room that covered half an acre of ground. Along one side, fruit and vegetable matter was separated into lots or groups according to type, and large bins were full to overflowing with fruits from Wooki and other worlds.

"Help yourself, but don't eat too much, since you aren't accustomed to the place yet," Rowoonr warned him. "You will be less active here, and will find you don't need to eat as much as you did at home."

Almost timidly, Chewbacca approached one of the bins. It contained a sweet fruit that was rare in the area around Chewbacca's home territory and was, therefore, considered a luxury. Here there were mounds of the fruit. Selecting two of the ripe green globes, he tucked one under his arm and began gnawing the rind of the other. Rowoonr motioned him over to the door.

"Here is your first lesson in being man-like." He handed Chewbacca a net bag and showed him how to carry it over one shoulder. Into it he placed the second fruit.

"Now, you see, you still have your hands free. And, if you'll notice, you have room to carry two more of those globe-fruits. Unless you would prefer pulve?"

Chewbacca eagerly accepted the two yellowish, hairy globes that were an off-world delicacy occasionally offered by the infrequent traders who sometimes came to Wooki. The full bag pulled at his neck fur a little, but he became accustomed to it quickly.

They were about to leave the kitchen area when Chewbacca caught a smell that was familiar, yet unknown. Wrinkling his muzzle in a puzzled grimace, he turned to the older Wookiee.

"Meat, Chewbacca. They cook it here," Rowoonr told him. "You may someday learn to eat it that way. I have. But the healer says too much of it is not good for you. Some animals, mostly humans, eat much cooked meat. They prefer it to good fruits and vegetables."

Chewbacca growled deep in his throat. "The more I hear of them, the less I like them."

"Yes, I was like that, too. But after a while...well, I was younger than you are now when I was captured, and here I am still. You grow used to them after a while. And there is work to do to help our people. In time, you will not even notice their strangeness."

Rowoonr opened the door and led Chewbacca out onto a grassy green area. The young Wookiee sniffed the closely cropped green vegetation before stepping on it, and continued to look and sniff while munching his fruit. Across the area was the place Rowoonr told him he would work; its access was a door painted a peculiar color. Kazeel had no equivalent for the human designation. The closest approximation was "whitened reflection of the stormy midnight sky".

"Phurrphhl," Rowoonr tried to imitate the word the doctor used, and gave up. "THAT door," he amended sheepishly. "THAT door" it remained ever after in Chewbacca's mind, for there was only one of that color in the compound. As he passed through it, he thought it strange that it didn't smell different, despite its looks. The different smells, he found to his dismay, came from behind "THAT door": man smells and chemical smells and animal smells and other smells that were fainter and farther off. Each hallway down which they walked was lined with doors on both sides, and behind those doors were men and other animals.



"This is where they heal their own kind," Rowoonr told him. Chewbacca snorted in disgust. Everyone knew that sandy-floored caves with fresh running water were the only safe places for the sick. The demons that caused illness did not live in such places--they liked evil smells and dark, noisy, crowded places.

The man smell didn't fade, but other smells became stronger. Chewbacca recognized the scent of Wookiee, and soon found the rooms where Wookiees were kept. It was horrible! The rooms had windows, and hard floors, and *beds*!

How could a Wookiee get well in one of these rooms? Chewbacca turned to his older companion. "Why don't they have caves to get well in? They can't get well here!"

"There aren't any caves," Rowoonr said. "But they do get well here, quite often!" His voice was amused.

Chewbacca just shook his head and stared.

Chewbacca's life among men soon settled into a routine. The mornings were taken up with learning to understand man-talk--although he could never learn to *speak* it because of the shape of his mouth and his vocal cords--and with what small tasks he could do to help the healer and the other Wookiees.

Lunch was taken in the afternoon with Rowoonr and the doctor, and Chewbacca took advantage of the time to ask questions and indulge his curiosity. Then it was back to the hospital and the laboratory for more instructions. Late afternoons were given to physical exercise with Rowoonr and to recreational activities when Chewbacca could do much as he liked. After he overcame his initial dislike for the smell of burning fuels, he began hanging around the docking bays, watching the freighters. He met every slave ship from Wooki with the doctor and his human aides, but never again saw any of the slavers from the ship he'd been brought on.

Chewbacca spent his evenings with other Wookiees. Unlike the privately owned slave Wookiees, the ones from the hospital compound were permitted, even encouraged, to socialize with one another. Rowoonr introduced Chewbacca to several females, and one of them became a good friend--and his first love.

Rowoonr clucked over Chewbacca and Ghahi like an old Washu bird, but they giggled and teased him and went their own way. Ghahi's golden fur mixed with Chewbacca's deepening brown fur when their heads were together as they plotted some new but harmless scheme. Life was serious for them, but good, and they were happy as they worked and played together.

It was some time before they realized why they were being allowed so much freedom, and finding out why did not improve Chewbacca's humor. One day, while on rounds, one of the human orderlies broached the subject to Chewbacca.

"That girl of yours is a good-looking Wookiee," he said, giving Chewbacca a sly look. "Got any permanent plans?"

Chewbacca shrugged his shoulders non-committally. As a matter of fact, he *had* considered it, but something inside kept telling him no. Since Ghahi had not mentioned a permanent arrangement either, he'd assumed it didn't matter. They were friends--that was what was important.

"Fella your age should be thinkin' about pups," the orderly said with a wink.

Chewbacca growled deep in his throat, causing the orderly to inspect the next ward room *much* more thoroughly while the Wookiee waited in the hall. Pups! How could he even consider pups at this time? He was learning. And when he had learned enough he would go back to his planet and save his people from the slavers. How could he have pups while he was a slave? His hackles still stood up, but he had ceased growling when the orderly came back into the hallway.

"I didn't mean anything by it," the human said hesitantly. "Really. It's just that when--when a guy gets to a certain age he wants to settle down."

\*What kind of future can a slave offer a child?\* the Wookiee asked sadly, smoothing down the fur on the back of his neck with a big paw.

"Yes, I see what upset you," the orderly said. "But that's what they want from you--why you aren't gelded, I mean."

Chewbacca walked the rest of the rounds in silence, the thoughts gnawing at his brain. Was this true? Would they take his son or daughter? Ghahi's child? *No*, he reasoned, *not unless there is a child*. Grimly, Chewbacca vowed there would not be. He was here, and his life was his own to do with as he pleased. But to cause another life to be created, to share this life that he led...

Without stopping Chewbacca made a fist and calmly punched it through the wall near the ward-station. Plaster and wood cracked and splintered, flying in all directions. Without a word he extracted his fist from the hole and walked on, leaving the human orderly to stare in amazement and concern.

As the years passed Chewbacca had more free time to spend where he liked. And he liked to spend it in the port area. The generation who were children when Chewbacca first came to Treganno grew up seeing the big, gentle Wookiee watching rampside as they learned their trades and became experts in their fields. They came to know him as a quiet, good-natured observer of their mechanical talents. And many of them came to be good friends.

Chewbacca celebrated his 85th summer with his first ride in a sub-orbital transport. Ghahi was with him when his friend, Carsvek T'ifl,



offered them a ride while he tested the new piloting mechanisms of his experimental craft. Chewbacca and Ghahi accepted readily.

"Now watch," Carsvek said to Chewbacca, who sat next to him in the front of the craft. Ghahi looked on from the back. "This is the thruster, this is the breakfall, and this is the steering stick."

Chewbacca nodded solemnly as Carsvek activated the controls and blasted up and out of the docking bay. Staring in fascination, he watched the tops of trees swaying far below him; he looked ahead and saw the clouds pulling apart to let them pass. When the ache in his chest warned that he'd been holding his breath long enough, Chewbacca let out a sigh and sat back, relaxing in his seat. So this is what it felt like to be a bird! Looking back, he smiled at Ghahi, and saw the joy she felt shining in her eyes.

Carsvek took them over the continent where they lived, pointing out places of interest and acting like a tour guide. Then they were back in the docking bay, settling to the ground like a feather dropped from a gleaming silver bird, and the experience was over. But not diminished. Chewbacca never forgot that day, nor the kindness of one eccentric old mechanic.

Along with the rest of the medical staff, Chewbacca was kept extremely busy over the next few days. An unknown epidemic came in with traders who had just made a stop-over at an outlying colony. By the time the epidemic was under control, a slave ship was in and Chewbacca had his hands full. Instead of being able to spend his evenings with Ghahi, he went to work in the recovery rooms, dispensing medicines and encouragement to the newly gelded males. He had become the authority on Wookiees--the doctor was very old now, and his aide was a testy young man with neither the patience nor the understanding of the big, furry Wookiee.

This was Chewbacca noted, the first slave shipment in almost five years. And from the looks of it, slaves were not the highly marketable commodity they once had been. Chewbacca filed that thought away in his mind for his next meeting with Ghahi, to see if she knew why the once regular shipments had become so infrequent.

Rwooonr, at the respectable age of 155 summers, had found a mate and, with the doctor's blessing, had moved to Kressano where he could work for hire in the pleasure houses. Chewbacca had missed him frequently in the years since, but never more than now. In order to see to his charges he had to forego his socializing for weeks at a time, until the illnesses and infections were cleared up and the new arrivals were taught the rudiments of living in a human-dominated society.

Four months passed, almost without his realization, before Chewbacca was again able to seek out Ghahi. What a store of things he had saved up to tell her!

"Not here," the ward nurse told him when he went looking for her in her dormitory. He waited for the nurse to go on, and when she didn't, he probed further.

"She's gone--I don't know where. You'll have to go to records and ask." Her scowl was so fierce under her frizzy red hair that Chewbacca backed part-way down the hall and then walked quickly out into the courtyard.

*Gone, he thought as he walked. Why would she leave her home? Why would she leave me? unless--*

The new thought filled him with a panic such as he had never known, and he fairly flew toward the record office. They had decided long ago about not having pups--at least, not while they were tied to this man's world. But the powers-that-be had the ability to change arrangements at will, and to do as they pleased. Had they grown tired of waiting, and decided to--

*Ghahi is mine, Chewbacca told himself firmly. Mine and mine alone. And I will kill for her, if I have to. I will find her no matter where they have sent her. This planet is not that big...*

The records room was white-tiled, quiet, and well-lit. It was not prepared for an angry Wookiee. Chewbacca roared into the room, sweeping people out of his way like dry leaves before a wind storm. His Kazeel was barely understandable to the clerk, even though the man was fluent in the language.

"Wher's Ghahi?\*" Chewbacca roared. "What have you done with her?\*"

The clerk backed up a few steps, frightened, but angry. "Why should you care? Your're nothing but--urk!"

Chewbacca leaned over the desk and plucked the man from the ground by his shirt front.

"My Ghahi is missing, and I want to know where she is. Her dorm warden said to ask you. So I am asking you: where is she?\*" Chewbacca forced himself to set the man down on his feet carefully.

"I'll check," the man stammered through chattering teeth. "Ah, here it is. Sold to--"

Chewbacca grabbed the transaction records from the clerk. He had spent the last 65 years learning to read the strange symbols men used to store information. He read the transaction papers. They verified all that he had feared--and worse.

An eerie howl rose from Chewbacca's throat. The other occupants of the room covered their ears, but not even stoppered ears could keep gooseflesh from rising on the people who heard the Wookiee's call. The sound was like the mountain wind keening for a dead lover.

Ghahi had indeed been sold--sold into the shadowed world of the pleasure palaces of Pekin.



The pleasure palaces...and he was here on Treganno. Alone.

Keening, Chewbacca huddled on the floor. He clutched the records of his chosen mate's sale and disposition. Ghahi, his friend, his lover, his mate, was gone. Only an aching in his belly reminded him that he still lived, to face an emptiness he could see no end to.

"Chewbacca?" A soft, firm voice intruded on the suspended consciousness of the Wookiee. "Chewbacca, there is nothing you can do. This withdrawal won't help. She is gone. Life goes on for you, for all of us."

The Wookiee growled, but it was less menacing than questioning. "Why?" he asked. Getting no answer, he looked up.

The man who stood there was twenty-five or thirty years old; he was tall, had golden eyes, and a serious face--yet managed to project the aura of a child's simplicity.

"That's better," he said with a tentative smile as Chewbacca began to respond to his surroundings once more. "I need you to help me, if you will."

Chewbacca shook his head and looked back at the papers in his hand. "Go away."

"Chewbacca," the voice was sad, and tired, "the doctor is very sick, and I need you to help me. He is going to die, and the authorities do not want to appoint another doctor. They want to kill all the sick Wookiees and sell the healthy ones." The man shook his head, hoping Chewbacca was listening to him. "I need your help to stop them."

"Why stop them?" Chewbacca grumbled. "Wookiees are better off dead."

"You didn't think so before," the man reminded him, "you wanted to live."

"I hate it. I hate men. I hate life," Chewbacca said, finally. The statement's vehemence contrasted vividly with his detached manner. "I want to die."

"I don't think you do. Ghahi is alive, and if you are not, you will never find her." The man looked around at the people in the room and quietly motioned for them to leave. When the last one had gone, he approached the Wookiee, not withdrawing his hand when Chewbacca tried to pull away.

"Chewbacca, you have been treated badly by men, but you are still living. And those who helped you before will help you again, if they can. But you must help us, too. The doctor is dying and the Wookiees need care. I can try to take the doctor's place, but I have no one to take *your* place. You are important to me, and I need your help."

Chewbacca looked at him for a moment, then got to his feet, letting the papers drift from his hands to the floor.

"Take me to the healer," he said, feeling the hollowness inside him grow smaller. "He was my friend, and I could trust him. I will be with him when he passes on."

Without a word, the human turned and led the way through a maze of corridors to the doctor's room. Chewbacca went in, closed the door, and sat on a stool near the bed.

The old man was truly dying. He was but a pale shadow of the man who had so soundly reprimanded the slaveship captain on Chewbacca's arrival here on Treganno. He was old for humankind, 92 years old. Chewbacca counted again to make sure. Yes, 92. And Chewbacca was 89 summers, hardly more than a young adult.

*Strange, he thought, watching the afternoon sun stream in through a window, that with all their intelligence humans are so fragile and weak. Short-lived and short on patience. I have been with them through my childhood, and my future looks no different. There will always be men.*

The old doctor passed on early in the evening, waking long enough to tell Chewbacca goodbye and to listen to a bird outside his window calling farewell to the day. He chuckled at the song; then he relaxed and died with a smile on his mouth.

Chewbacca, having done all that was necessary for his friend, called in the orderlies and went to his own room. His thoughts, as he fell asleep, were neither on the doctor nor on Ghahi, but on the morrow's tasks. With the patient acceptance of so many long-lived races, he relegated the past to the past. Tomorrow would take care of itself, and so would he. He would never forget the two dear friends he had lost today--they had meant much to him--but in his loss and confusion he retreated to the one instinct they could never destroy within him: survival.

\*

From that morning on, Chewbacca worked closely with the new doctor, even learning to call him Brekh. But he no longer socialized with the other Wookiees after his work was through. Eventually, they came to accept it and left him alone. He developed other pursuits to account for his spare time: mechanics, gambling, drinking. When he felt desire, he would spend an evening with a female of his own race, but he never allowed himself to care for any of them. He was so frequently involved in human activities that the humans soon considered him almost human. He was given the run of the city, the shops, and the bars.

Besides his after-hours activities, there was little enough to keep Chewbacca occupied. Slave raids became even more infrequent as trade with Wooki expanded. Chewbacca needed something to occupy his time.

He began to listen to human gossip. Rumors were circulating about strange animals called



clones that had taken over a planet called Friel. With uncharacteristic interest, Chewbacca got a map of the galactic quadrant and looked for Friel, marking it with a stylus he had brought back from the office. Then he found Wooki, and Treganno, and Ghahi's new planet, and marked them off on the map, too.

Chewbacca's interest lasted only a short time, however. Several days later, looking at the map, and realizing the distances actually involved, Chewbacca growled savagely and drew a large red X across the face of the map. He then threw the map in the trash compacter.

Decades passed. Chewbacca's only close friend was Monley T'ifl, old Carsvek's grandson. Monley was sincere and compassionate, if not very bright, and readily accepting of all the Wookiees still on Treganno. Chewbacca had patience with him, repeating instructions slowly and talking about the reasons behind things.

Their friendship was deep and real, and lasted many years. Early in 6062, when Chewbacca had been a slave on Treganno for 135 years, the friendship weathered a serious crisis. The slave raids on Wooki had finally been brought to a halt, but the trading and sale of those already in bondage was winked at by the authorities. The Treganno captives were among those who might be affected by this latest quirk in human mental processes.

Chewbacca was on early morning rounds one day when Monley came rushing up to him and tried to pull him into a corner. Chewbacca did not budge, and Monley tried pulling him by the fur. The huge Wookiee, anxious to continue his chores, stayed put.

"Gotta talk to you," Monley said desperately, one hand brushing unruly brown hair out of his eyes.

"\*Now?\*" Chewbacca asked, testily. He had just been assigned four pups with stomach problems.

"It's important. Come see me as soon as you're done here," Monley said.

Chewbacca nodded with resignation and hurried off to see to his new patients.

After finally settling his new charges for the evening, Chewbacca went looking for Monley. He found him waiting in his room.

"\*Well, what was so important?\*" he grumbled as he changed out of his soiled white jacket.

"I heard some soldiers talking, Chewbacca, and they're shutting down the Wookiee wing of the hospital. There won't be another doctor--"

Chewbacca made a face. "\*Expected as much,\*" he growled. "\*They don't seem to understand the importance of this--\*"

"Going to sell you, too, if the rumor--"

Chewbacca drew himself up, fire in his eyes. "\*No, they are not!\*"

"But I heard them!"

"\*I will not be sold, not ever. I will die first.\*" Chewbacca grumbled and growled to himself for a moment longer, then laid a gentle paw on Monley's shoulders. "\*You are my friend, and I would not see you hurt. I don't trust the laws of men. Please stay away from me until it is all over, so they do not judge you guilty of whatever crimes I may be forced to commit.\*"

"Chewbacca!" Monley said in an exasperated tone, "I can help!"

"\*Oh?\*" The Wookiee looked at him disbelievingly. "\*How?\*"

"We can take a ship and get out of here. I know one--"

"\*No!\*" the Wookiee barked. "\*That is a sure path to death for you. We will be gunned down, or brought back here and killed. There must be some other way. Maybe the rumors are just gossip. Maybe it won't happen.\*"

"But, Chewbacca--"

"\*No more,\*" Chewbacca said, dismissing the possibility and Monley at the same time. "\*I will not hear of stealing. Not until it is the only way left.\*"

As Chewbacca watched his friend walk down the hall, he wondered, should he wait until the whole thing was settled? What was best for his people, his friends, himself? The big furry head shook slowly from side to side. Humans were a strange breed. They didn't make much sense most of the time. What should he do now?

Perhaps, as always, waiting was best. He straightened, and walked away purposefully. They were short-handed, likely to remain so. He had evening rounds to keep.

It was while he was still on rounds that Monley's 'rumor' became substantiated. After decades of indifference, Chewbacca began to listen to political and local news.

Doctor Brekh, now over 100 years old, was not expected to last more than a day or two. The local authorities, acting under Senate direction, refused to appoint another doctor. The Senate had clamped down on the slave trade in all non-human life forms and on the licensing of pleasure houses. When Releth Deadmoon's heir had the misfortune to be caught with both the slave-ship registrations AND the licenses for most of the slave-using brothels in several systems, he had been promptly indicted for illegal activities.

Now the entire hospital--orderlies, wardens, and even patients--was buzzing in anticipation of the repercussions of this act. Not since the fall of Friel, so many decades past, had there been so many rumors of political factions, fragmenting of the Empire, war, clones...



Chewbacca, listening to the talk, remembering past rumors, realized that the local authorities were looking forward with great relief to closing the Wookiee intake facilities on Treganno and disposing of the remainder of the "slave trained" animals.

He continued to listen and, later that night, as his evening rounds were almost over, heard two unfamiliar voices.

"...can't be expected to hang on much longer. It'll be a shame, though, when all his helpers are sent off. I was getting to like that big Wookiee--he's so quiet and gentle, especially with the young ones."

"Does seem a shame they can't keep him on, but Jethra says he'll have to go when they close the wing. And he'll even have to be gelded, 'cause the buyer's got a pure-bred herd and doesn't want an unknown strain mixed in. Poor Chewbacca."

The humans were silhouetted against the lighted doorway in the connecting corridor. Neither glanced into the darkened hall where Chewbacca stood listening.

"I know. It's horrible, the way Wookiees are treated," commented the owner of the first voice. "What'll happen now if a domestic Wookiee gets sick, with no one to care for him?"

"It'd be better if they'd outlaw keeping them at all, like Organa wants the Senate to do. He says they're really an intelligent species, and not just bright animals, and that since the slave raids've stopped and trading's opened up the Wookiees are hunting, and living in villages, and using..."

The voices trailed off down the hall. Chewbacca, his duties forgotten, took the quickest route to his room. Gelded?! SOLD!? With the patience of the jungle-trained, Chewbacca began planning his escape. Monley had been right after all.

He must get off planet. Space was the best place to hide. And, thanks to the late Carsvek T'ifl's surreptitious teachings, he would be able to fly any freighter with a hyper-space system.

It was late evening before Chewbacca moved stealthily to Monley's room. He knocked softly and opened the door with care at the answer. Monley sat on the bed reading a book, his packed duffle bag on the bed beside him.

"Wondered if you'd show," Monley said with a chuckle. "I'd just about given up."

"\*I am ready to take a ship and leave, forever,\* Chewbacca informed Monley.

"Let's go then. I know a freighter that's down with a minor engine problem," Monley said with a wink. "The 'problem' being that I disconnected the metered drive transmission to keep

her here. Since it can't take off, the crew thinks it's safe to go drinking and won't be home until morning. Wonder where the ship'll be by then, eh, Chewbacca?" He led the way to the docking bay.

The docking bay was quiet, with only a few lights showing around the perimeter. The ship sat like a bird on a nest, ramp up and powercells recharging. Monley carefully checked the charges, then pulled the plugs and rewound the cords. The cells were fully charged and ready to go.

Chewbacca was worried that someone would come by and see them, and that he'd be forced to fight. He preferred to avoid conflict. Humans were so fragile. Chewbacca was relieved when Monley activated the hatch and the darkness inside showed that the ship was probably deserted.

"We're in luck, Furry Friend," Monley said with a chuckle as he sat behind the controls in the cockpit. "We'll be gone before they're even good and drunk. And tomorrow we'll see a port official I know, and get new papers." He engaged the engine, laid in the course, and the ship lifted off.

Monley seemed well in control of the situation, so the Wookiee went through the four cabins to collect the personal possessions of the former owners.

"Great," Monley told him when the Wookiee dumped the duffle of clothes, holos, and small personal items in the middle of the cockpit. "Now jettison it."

"Wroo?" Chewbacca said in confusion. "\*What about the owners?\*"

"We can't keep it here, and we can't send it back--they'd know where to look for us. Drop it out the 'lock-chute."

Chewbacca picked up the bag, but made no move to comply. Monley turned to his friend, exasperation clearly reflected on his face. "We've already stolen a ship. That's a high felony, if they catch us. So don't carp at a minor thing like this. DUMP THE DAMN THING!"

Chewbacca shrugged and trundled to the airlock chute. Putting the duffle bag in, he studied the controls a moment. Then he pushed a button and heard the whine of the cycling mechanism. Satisfied, he went back to the cockpit and dropped into his seat. "\*Where are we going now?\*"

Monley had grown up with Wookiees and Ka-zeel was like a second native language to him. He smiled at Chewbacca's question.

"Remember Melapam? He's a smuggler now, working out of Commenor. I haven't seen him in some time, but he owes me a few favors, and he knows enough about a Senator or two that he can pull strings when he has to. With his help, we'll get this ship re-registered as ours and blast off for some back-water worlds looking for work."

Chewbacca nodded agreement, his gaze wandering the starfields ahead of them. As long as



they had a map...

\*We do have a map, I hope?\* the Wookiee grumbled.

"A whole naviputer full, if it makes you feel any better," Monley growled back. "We'll go into hyperspace until we get close to Commenor, then we can jump back into regular space and find docking. Commenor's a busy trading center, so they shouldn't be too anxious to question a small freighter. But I'll have identification numbers, credentials, and a cover story ready just in case." Monley sighed. "Better get some sleep, Chewbacca. We'll raise Commenor sometime in the early ship-morning, and you'll need to be alert."

Growling agreement, Chewbacca left his seat. Remembering to duck his head in the low hatchway, he lumbered to the rear of the ship. He chose the cabin he wanted and fell unceremoniously onto the bunk. He relaxed at last, and sleep overcame even his objections to the man-smell of the place.

He was shaken awake the next morning by a widely grinning Monley.

"Melapam is here." The human hadn't been so jubilant in years. Chewbacca remembered not to growl at him. It was morning, after all, and time for him to be up.

\*Good. That was fast,\* was all the Wookiee said, remembering to duck his head as he got to his feet.

"I'll go with him, and get the paperwork done. How does *Lucky Jewel* sound?"

When Chewbacca looked at him with a puzzled expression Monley smiled. "For the name of the ship."

The big Wookiee shrugged. \*Fine. Bring me something to eat, will you? There's nothing I can eat in the galley.\*

It was Monley's turn to look puzzled. "You eat meat, don't you? There's some in the holding compartment."

\*Not unless I know what it is,\* the Wookiee countered.

"Well, watch the ship and I'll bring you some fruit." The human disappeared down the hall.

That evening the *Lucky Jewel*, a small freighter registered on Commenor blasted out of port on official business; she was to serve as a courier ship for a small company dealing in resort real estate.

"Good thing I got the job. Fuel's expensive!" Monley congratulated himself as he got the

hyperspace co-ordinates from the naviputer. "Never been to Rynan," he added thoughtfully.

Chewbacca didn't share the human's enthusiasm. No matter where they went, he'd have to be careful about getting off the ship. Some places were VERY picky about credentials, and the ones he now carried might not stand up under a close security check.

After landing on Rynan, Chewbacca stayed on the ship while Monley delivered the contract and picked up another small job. This one took them to Ustella Moonbase for a quick transfer of a small, precious cargo. At Ustella, they found several more jobs. The more jobs they completed successfully, the more work was available. It was the first job--the one they lucked into because of Melapam--that started the ball rolling.

\*

The next couple years brought plenty of work and the credits came rolling in. It was not enough to make them rich, but it was enough that Chewbacca could afford a little gambling and Monley could buy the tapes and holos that he seemed to enjoy more than any companionship. Chewbacca learned to drink in moderation, and kept himself to rigidly-set limits as to how much he could gamble, and where. He had no wish to become indentured because he'd lost all his credits in a hi-lo game.

The Clone rumors grew worse: the Frielean society had been destroyed and now the native races of Friel were being hounded mercilessly, driven from one safe haven to the next.

Chewbacca knew what a clone was, but couldn't understand how there could be whole armies of them, or why they wanted to conquer Friel in the first place, so he largely dismissed the rumors. But rumor also said the Jedi Knights were spending a lot of time in that area, though as far as Chewbacca could see, neither they nor the local authorities were able to provide sufficient protection against privateers.

Twice the *Lucky Jewel* narrowly managed to escape, and Chewbacca and Monley breathed sighs of relief as they blasted into hyper-space, leaving a pirate ship behind. The third time...

Coming out of Ustella on the way to Kresano, Monley caught sight of a small ship that was gaining on them fast and alerted the Wookiee.

\*Better move out quick,\* Chewbacca told him. The Wookiee watched the sensors anxiously. The space between the *Lucky Jewel* and her pursuer was rapidly diminishing.



"We'll make it," said Monley, peering at the naviputer. "We'll make it."

The ship rocked violently and the first set of rear screens went down. Chewbacca grunted testily. \*Really?\*

Until now, the speed of the *Lucky Jewel* had been their main safety factor. Aside from their hand-blasters, there was only one small, turret-mounted laser rifle on the ship. They could outrun almost any ship made, but the ship behind them also had speed, and the fact that it would fire on them was disquieting. Firing back would only slow them down and get them killed.

"We'll have to surrender," Monley said. "We'll never make it into hyperspace before they cripple us."

\*Well, maybe when they're on board...\* Chewbacca fired the retro rockets, then cut power to the engines, braking the *Lucky Jewel* to a halt. The ship momentarily hung suspended in the starlit vault of space. Then, with a slight shudder, she moved backwards. Chewbacca looked at Monley.

"Tractor beams," the human said grimly.

The grinding sound that followed his words indicated that the *Lucky Jewel* was now coupled to the attacking ship and was going to be boarded.

"Ready?" Monley licked his lips, hefted his blaster.

\*Sure,\* Chewbacca mumbled, blaster rifle in his hands. He didn't plan to die cheaply.

Footsteps sounded beyond the hatchway. Chewbacca counted at least nine beings. The hatchway came open with an arrogant boldness that told Chewbacca the pirates weren't expecting any resistance. The Wookiee opened fire.

The first human through the doorway was cut in half. Behind him, two more humans saw their peril too late and fell, their chests burned away. The remaining pirates scurried for safety as Chewbacca's roar of defiance reverberated from the metal hull.

Monley, who seemed stunned by the Wookiee's actions, took cover behind the hatchway, where he could still cover the doorway. Chewbacca disdained the need for protection and stood in the doorway squarely facing the pirate crew, whose desultory fire was ill-aimed and ill-timed.

The Wookiee could hear angry grumbling from the pirates.

"What ever possessed Chrak to walk into an open door like that?"

"Too damn dumb for his own good. Look at the mess we're in now."

When the firing trailed off, Chewbacca lowered his rifle. "Ghrash braghk rashaki?" he called down the hallway. A louder buzz of conver-

sation replied. One voice was raised above the others.

"Anyone here speak Kazeel?"

"He wants to know if you're through fighting," Monley said from his hiding place.

"All we want is the cargo. You'll be free to go," a voice said reassuringly.

"Put up your weapons and come on out. He won't shoot. He only wants to talk," Monley said.

"So talk!" It sounded like the same voice that had spoken earlier.

"I'm Monley T'iff, captain of the *Lucky Jewel*. Chewbacca here is my partner. We run a legitimate, independent courier service."

"You mean you *did*," the voice stated. "Well, our captain may be dead, but we still got a job to do. We'll just take your cargo off your hands and--"

The Wookiee growled menacingly and cocked his laser rifle.

"Look," the pirate said, "I don't like to kill, but that don't mean I won't. You're outnumbered at least five-to-one. Whyn't you be smart and surrender?"

Chewbacca snorted in derision, growled something in Kazeel. Monley nodded. He said to the pirates, "Maybe you do outnumber us, but we got the drop on you. You can't make it out the 'lock without becoming a target. N' me and Chewbacca're both damn good shots."

There was more grumbling from the pirate crew. The man who'd designated himself spokesman said, "A stand-off. Anybody got any ideas?"

Chewbacca growled a long comment to Monley. The spacer looked at him askance. "You kiddin', Chewbacca? They'd *never* go along with that!"

"Along with what?" the pirate spokesman called down the hall.

Monley shrugged and answered. "My partner's pointed out that our ship is badly damaged, and if you take our cargo we won't have the credits to get her fixed. And without a ship we'll get nothin' but roustabout jobs. He says you're three men short now, so why don't you take us on to bring your crew back up to strength. You hire us and we give up the cargo without a fight. Then you can blow this ship and she's just another spaceport statistic."

"How do we know we can trust you?" the pirate asked.

"We could say the same thing," Monley retorted.

"All right, I'm coming out," the pirate



spokesman said. "Meet me halfway. And you men, cover me," he added in an aside to the crew. The pirate stepped into the center of the corridor, rifle cocked and ready. Monley came out of hiding and joined Chewbacca at the door.

The Wookiee nodded to himself as the pirate walked cautiously toward them. He had short, grey-brown hair and a craggy face reminiscent of the Aguent native, yet he carried the body bulk of an adult Corellian. He would be a good leader, Chewbacca reasoned. Unlike the dead Chrak, he thought before he acted and he knew when to take risks himself--and when not.

"Wroo?"

"He wants to know who you are," Monley said.

"Hak Shimek," the pirate said, eyeing Chewbacca and Monley with shrewd curiosity. "First Mate--uh, *captain* of the *Kind Lady*."

Chewbacca snorted derisively at the ship's name. Hak Shimek may not have understood Kazeel, but he clearly had a well-developed sense of humor. He grinned with boyish charm, "Yeah, I guess she ain't been a 'kind lady' to you. But if I *do* buy this crazy deal of yours..." He paused, listened to the increased murmurings of his crew.

At last he spoke again. "All right, let's say this--you get us your cargo and we'll leave your ship here after we cook it. We'll try you out and if it works, fine. If it don't, well..." He let the idea trail off.

He turned to Chewbacca, who stood regarding him smugly. "And don't forget: I give the orders around here. You do what I tell you or I'll put you out an airlock. I won't stand for insubordination."

Chewbacca looked placidly down at the pirate captain from his full two meter height. "Reuss," he said, trying to look serious. Actually, he was glad the pirate had taken his suggestion--this solved some *big* problems. Without a ship and without a job, they would have been too readily visible to any authority who wondered about their papers. Now, as part of a pirate crew, they would be left alone: either because of payoffs, or because of their reputations. In either case, Chewbacca knew he and Monley would not be a liability to the pirate crew. And he was willing to bet that Hak Shimek knew this, also.

The new captain of the *Kind Lady* went back toward the loading hatch, shouting orders. The bodies of the ex-captain and his two unlucky henchmen lay in the hatchway. Chewbacca and Monley glanced around the cockpit to make sure they weren't leaving anything behind, then they stepped over the bodies. Monley went to the hold area to help the pirates, and Chewbacca went to his cabin to pack his meagre belongings. Then he went to the hold to oversee the cargo transfer while Monley packed in turn.

Hak, who had returned to the cockpit to pull the navigation plates from the *Lucky Jewel*'s

naviputer, joined Chewbacca in the hold area after the courier ship's larger cargo--machinery, computer systems, prefab parts--had been transferred. "That it?" he asked.

Since the pirate didn't speak Kazeel, Chewbacca motioned him over to five small chests still stacked against the wall. Pulling open one of the chest lids, the Wookiee allowed a handful of deep red and violet jewels to fall from the chest to the floor.

Captain Shimek stood transfixed. "Are these all Jranika jewels?" he was finally able to ask. His eyes wandered to the other chests as he picked up three of the gems at his feet. The touch of them was cool, yet they shone with streaks of fire as if they were living things.

Chewbacca shook his head. He pointed to some larger crates against another wall and lifted his rifle.

"Weapons, huh? And jewels. And the things we already loaded. Anything else?"

Chewbacca snickered as he moved to the rear panel and pulled it loose with an expert touch. Several large sealed bags fell out of the recess, and the smell that came from them was unmistakable.

"You were smuggling SPICE?" Shimek gaped. Grinning, Chewbacca nodded.

"Well," Hak said finally, scratching his head at the unexpected riches of his haul, "I guess that's more than enough to merit the trouble of training you two." He looked pointedly at the bags of spice. "The other guy in on this?"

Chewbacca snorted and glanced at the spice bags, then turned away with a harsh laugh.

"He doesn't know about the spice, huh? Private thing?" Shimek poked the Wookiee in the side.

Chewbacca growled and bared his teeth, then thought better of it. With a patient sigh, he mimed dealing cards and looked up with a shrug.

"Gambling debt, huh?" The captain grinned. "I think I'm beginning to like you! Let's get this stuff ready to ship out."

\*

Chewbacca and Monley settled into the *Kind Lady* with only a small regret at losing the *Lucky Jewel*. For years, things ran smoothly. They were paid bonus after bonus plus expenses and the usual cut for their work. It was an ideal life for them: no one asked where they were from or why they joined up. Monley grew old, but he could still plot a course, and scheme, and cook, and could even spin a mighty tall yarn or two when folks were in the mood. Chewbacca won his place on the crew many times over by his "vicious" act when they boarded



an overhauled ship. The crew, taken aback by a "rampaging" Wookiee, would capitulate quickly, saving bloodshed on both sides.

For fourteen years Chewbacca counted on size and "ferocity" to avoid killing. At the beginning of 6075, however, things took a turn for the worse. The Clone Wars had "officially" begun in 6066, and still continued. Osia was now a major stronghold of the Clone Primerium. Elsewhere, events were in turmoil. The conservative faction of the Senate had gained control and ordered a withdrawal from the economic programs that had kept many of the poorer planets alive. Governmental control shifted almost daily in many sectors. Every planet had its run-ins with the Clones, or the Senate, or the Jedi, and ALL the government authorities were testy about piracy--especially since they now had so little they could afford to lose. Spacers who made money were few, and the ones who had no money were often drafted to work on the frontiers, fighting piracy in the name of 'the freedom of the spacelanes' or as a 'patriotic effort'. Bounty hunters proliferated. More and more Chewbacca found his life bound in, circumscribed, by the political games of humans.

Hak Shimek died in a raid near Ves and Chewbacca officially took over the crew, although he delegated much authority to Shimek's senior officer, Duke Hunter, a cunning and resourceful human. The *Kind Lady* once more made her mark, eluding even the Jedi patrols that were tracking the spacelanes, cleaning up the last of the clone outposts.

In 6076 the Clone Wars ended. The next year several Senatorial splinter factions united behind one man and elected Senator Palpatine president of the Senate. He received plenipotentiary powers to facilitate postwar restoration and rebuilding.

Chewbacca assumed at first that the only effect war's end would have on the *Kind Lady* would be an increase in "business" due to a revival in trade and commerce. But Palpatine's enlarged security forces soon controlled the spacelanes, and shortly after Palpatine's rise to power the *Kind Lady* was hauled to by an official cruiser.

The pirate ship managed to escape, but the losses were high. Monley T'ifl died defending Chewbacca from the heavy fire of the security agents, and several other hands were lost.

When Monley, his last link to his past, died in his arms, Chewbacca gave way to an ear-splitting rage. For once, he did not stop to think his actions through first. He needed to be up, to be doing. He needed vengeance for his friend.

Chewbacca gave orders that brought the *Kind Lady* a full 180° around. The patrol ship had heavier guns, but the pirate ship had top speed and maneuverability. With a series of dazzling spins and turns, Chewbacca succeeded in defeating the cruiser.

Teeth bared over a ferocious grimace, Chewbacca led his pirate crew in a deadly search-and-slaughter mission. No quarter was given. The

patrol craft's crew was slain and the ship was then loaded with explosives. The *Kind Lady* was taken out a safe distance. From this vantage point Chewbacca detonated the explosives. He watched the ship disintegrate. It helped ease the hurt, but it was not enough.

Chewbacca held a meeting of his crew.

\*I have respect for you all,\* Chewbacca told them, speaking his tongue slowly even though, after all these years, they understood him. \*Monley was my friend, my closest friend, and I have avenged his death and have given him the best memorial I could.\* A large, furry paw waved toward the port view screen where bits of the destroyed patrol cruiser were streaming past like a meteor shower.

\*I will lead only one more raid--one to get me a ship. Then I will leave you. I must have time to find out what I truly wish to do with my life, and I want time to grieve for the human who was like a brother to me. Duke Hunter will lead you well as captain, and will be fair to you. The *Kind Lady* is yours, and I wish you the best.\*

Less than a standard day later, the *Starhopper* came into view. The light cruiser's crew were bounty hunters, and once more Chewbacca led his pirate crew in a fight to the death. It was short and ferocious. When the last body had been ejected from the 'lock-chute, and the cargo hold was empty except for basic supplies for the Wookiee, Chewbacca took the ship. He set his navigator for Ustella Moonbase. He did not look back.

Ustella was busy. Ex-soldiers lined the streets, spending the money earned during wartime. Jedi rubbed shoulders with Imperial conscripts and conducted their esoteric affairs with grace and diplomacy.

Chewbacca, ignoring Jedi and soldier alike, stopped at the Port Beacon House, a frenetically active downport bar. He collected a pitcher of his favorite drink and let the rumors wash over him.

He was not yet ready to return to space, but if he were, where...? The Jedi general ObiWan Kenobi was on Alderaan, a good place for a pirate to avoid. Ves was fast recognizing Jedi contributions, and tolerance for them had grown--another good place to avoid. Talk of new Sith incursions was generally laughed at--the new Vader Dark Lord was still licking his wounds over the clones closing his major spaceport and driving him south. Could that offer possibilities?

Several pitchers later Chewbacca heard that some old friends were looking for work. Putting a few good words in the barkeeper's ear--and a few credits in his paw--Chewbacca went back to his newly registered ship, the *Sunspot*. He waited. It did not take long.

Space Fox, an old gambling chum, looked something like his namesake, only larger. Chew-



bacca signed him on as first mate, asking only that he clean up any old business before they took off. Fox grinned and bobbed out, coming back two measures later with his gear. He and Chewbacca played chess and talked of old times for a while, then went back to the Beacon House for dinner.

Riggels Gtahk, another non-human, came over to share a drink. He left two drinks later, promising to be at the ship in four measures, ready to run. And Ges'pek Duneralian dropped his spotted hide into Gtahk's recently vacated chair, bobbed his vestigial antlers, said he hoped the summons could be construed as a job offer, as he really needed one, and promised to join them on the *Sunspot* in three measures.

Chewbacca's mourning for Monley had been short, but sincere. Now it was over. It was time to return to space. And with a seasoned crew of his own choosing. With but few exceptions, Chewbacca had come to detest the humans who had enslaved him on general principles, and so he counted the fact that his crew was entirely non-human as a definite plus. Their papers were in order, they were down on their luck, they had worked pirate ships before. Chewbacca nodded as he and Space Fox left the Beacon House to return to the *Sunspot*. Good choices, indeed!

\*

For the next thirteen years their reputation as a small but competent crew proceeded them. It was a good time for Chewbacca. But all good things must end. And the political struggles of the humans from whom the Wookiee had tried to separate his life once more affected his future.

Senator Palpatine had declared himself Emperor, and with his reign came hosts of Imperial Stormtroopers and new communications systems and governing agencies. There were frequent run-ins with Imperial Storm-troopers. The transition caught the Jedi between the new government and the old ways. Enclave after Enclave went down under the waves of strength unleashed by the new Emperor. Even the mighty General Kenobi fled Alderaan, despite that planet's sympathetic leanings. The Alderaan Enclave died by assault from without and treachery within. A new reign of tyranny came into being across the galaxy.

Following the pattern set by his years aboard the *Kind Lady*, Chewbacca had encouraged the crew of the *Sunspot* to show mercy to those they overhauled and boarded. Circumstances now forced them to give up all pretense of nicety. When there was doubt about the authenticity of crew or ship, Chewbacca would burn both after the cargo was safely aboard the *Sunspot*.

Warrants went out for the arrests of the *Sunspot*'s crew. Chewbacca, caught by the shifting vagaries of the human political situation yet again, decided to leave humankind behind for good. He would return to Wooki and settle down. He had the money and the means. A recent haul had netted them a two-man flitter that fit nicely into one

of the *Sunspot*'s wing-supports. The crew could drop him into the air over Wooki and he'd be on his way home. They could then sell the *Sunspot* and split the proceeds equally.

Chewbacca announced his plan to his crew. Fox asked to speak after the Wookiee concluded. The mate's voice resembled the growls of a dog, but he was understandable.

"I think you are wrong in doing this, Cap," he said, showing his small sharp teeth in a grin. "They won't accept you back, and you won't have us to protect you."

The other two concurred, but the Wookiee was adamant. "I am going. If we meet again, someday, we will have a drink and remember old times. So don't shoot ME down, if you see me someday in space." He grinned.

The others still protested. "If it doesn't work out, it may not be that easy to leave again," Gtahk pointed out.

"And you *will* want to leave," Duneralian said. "Look at us, at all of us. We've become too used to the ways of men. We don't have any humans aboard. So why do we act like men when we are downport? You've gone beyond anything Wooki can offer you, Chewbacca."

Chewbacca shrugged off the warning. "Maybe. But I must find out for myself."

He climbed into the flitter, checked his possessions and his weapons, and gave the order to release the beam that held the craft to the mothership. He was excited for the first time in years.

*Home. I am going home.*

Chewbacca skimmed carefully over the vegetation, looking for familiar landmarks. He came to a bend in a river that he thought he recognized; but now there stood a cluster of wooden houses with thatched roofs in the clearing. Small Wookiees ran in the center of the little village, and further downstream a group of young females splashed in a pool made by logs that dammed the water. Smoke curled from the chimneys of some of the houses, and the jungle had been cut back from the river.

Chewbacca shook his head as the flitter skimmed over the terrain. Mankind was here. Trading, poaching, bringing more and more of *man's ways* to Wooki. Chewbacca discovered without surprise that the clean air he remembered was a thing of the past. The smell of fuel-burning vehicles and other artificial stench now dominated where jungle scents had once beckoned.

Skimming down over the river, following it like a road, he came to a camp of men. Traders lived here. He could tell it was a man-camp because of the vehicles parked nearby and by the large refuge dump behind it. Absently, he wondered if the trading had gone further up river to his



tribal lands...

More familiar land came into view. Chewbacca was happy--and apprehensive. The land was familiar; the small houses and the dammed pools were new. *The caves. What--?* Had his people really become so like men? Finding a clearing beyond the new village, Chewbacca landed his flitter and, as a second thought, locked it tight. Where man had been, nothing was simple. His people, like himself, might now be thieves.

Chewbacca pulled his rifle from the flitter before locking the last door. He slung it over his back. He could not go unarmed into the jungle and he did not want to give an impression of weakness to any unfriendly watching eyes.

He made his way without incident to the outlying area of the village. He passed six or seven small houses before the path opened out into the center of the village. A fire burned there, just as he remembered from his youth. Young pups played on the grass-like growth surrounding the flames, while a group of young mothers and older females sat in the shade of one of the few remaining trees. As Chewbacca came into the village center, the children ran up to him, stopped in curiosity, then broke and ran for their mothers. The women stopped talking as Chewbacca stood by the edge of the area, waiting for recognition. Finally, one of the women motioned him over.

He went to her proudly. "I am Chewbacca, Byarnan's son," he said by way of introduction. "I came from this tribe many years ago, as mankind reckons time."

"Chewbacca," the female said it thoughtfully. "You were taken in a slave raid?" How strange it was, after all this time, to hear another speak his language!

"Yes. I was one of the stolen ones." Chewbacca chewed on his lower lip, wanting to flee, yet hoping they would accept him.

"Are you free now?" the woman asked. "This tribe works with men, and we cannot accept escaped slaves into our midst."

"I came here to find a place to live and to be what I have always been," Chewbacca told her. A little of his old fire sparked his eyes. Some of the women there were his age: a home, a mate, a new beginning. Perhaps he could forget all that had gone before. Forget Monley, and Ghahi. Ghahi, whom he had never been able to find, no matter how hard he--or his friends--had looked. *Ghahi...*

"You will have to go to the trader's village. They can make you welcome. There is no room in our village for you. Speak to the elders." She held up a paw as he started to speak. "You can speak to them, Chewbacca, but they do not like the refuse of mankind, and will not, I think, want you to remind them of a past-that-is-forgotten. I am sorry, for I see that you are not as are so many who have returned. But the village must be protected."

She paused, as though expecting a response from him. "As always," Chewbacca finally dredged the ritual response from his memory.

"The males are out hunting," she continued. "You may be able to find them. Go east, into the jungle. The trail is there, if you can still find it. But do not hope for too much. I think your future lies in another place than this." She dismissed him with a wave of her paw and went back to the other women.

Chewbacca turned and made his way to the eastern trail, but his heart was heavy. Rowoonr had warned him, all those years ago. And Fox had warned him, and the others. He couldn't go back to what should have been. But he had had to try...

The sound of male Wookiees coming up the trail brought him sharply back to the present. Evidently, the hunting had been good, for they were singing and joking as they came into view. They stopped dead in the path on seeing Chewbacca. The leader came forward.

"What does a stranger want with our tribe?" he asked in a ritual, wary greeting.

"I have come to ask a home, a wife, and a place in the tribe that once was mine," Chewbacca said, hoping that he did not sound too threatening.

The other men of the tribe came up behind the chief. The eyes that stared at Chewbacca were wary, cold. Chewbacca could feel his stomach flip over.

"Once I was not a stranger to you," he said when it became obvious that they were not going to speak. "I am Chewbacca, of your tribe. I wish to stay here, to once more be one of the tribe. As if I had never been taken away."

"We have no room for one who lives as a man," the chief said. The murmur of the males behind him concurred. "You were raised like a man, and you live like a man. You even smell more like a man than a Wookiee. We do not want our tribe known as man-Wookiees; we do not want our females mated to such. You are no longer of this tribe, if, indeed, you ever were. Go now, or we will not guarantee your safety."

The chief drew himself up to his full height as he said this. Chewbacca, however, still topped him by some centimeters.

"I asked only a place to live, a mate, and a family. The same joys and problems that you have. Yes, I have lived as a man--as do you, with your houses and your weapons. But I am honest about it, while you are more like mankind than you can admit, thereby increasing by your dishonesty your resemblance to mankind. You are right. There is no place for an honest Wookiee here."

Chewbacca turned on his heel, leaving himself open to attack, but hoping they were still Wookiee enough to withhold their violence. He sighed heavily. He had hoped for a haven, a place to go back to what he had always believed was a normal life, free of the influence and the ties of men. Instead, he found his people living like men, yet shunning him for having done *the same* thing...

Chewbacca skirted the village. He unlocked his flitter and flew downstream to the near-



est man-camp. After buying provisions and booking passage on a freighter due to leave the next day, he fueled his flitter and headed for the big port.

A pang of regret crossed Chewbacca's mind as it hove into view. Like all ports, it sprawled across a bowl-shaped valley and up the sides of the surrounding hills. He could remember the smell of the fresh mint-trees of this valley from the years when he wandered here during the warm weather. Now it smelled of rocket-fuel, lubricants, hot metal, parched ground--and men. The lovely lush valley was barren, now, and covered by low, ugly buildings, and scorched depressions, like any other spaceport on any other planet.

Chewbacca landed and spent half of his remaining credits for food and lodgings and drink. Lots of drink.

Despite a gargantuan hangover, he felt more optimistic the next day. The freighter he'd booked passage on was a typical trader that stopped at almost a hundred ports on her rounds from here to there and back. The docket said they would hit Corell, Kressano, Alderaan, Non, Aquens, Bestine, Commenor, Urt, Cryston, Dotar, Lyston, Lucef, ayon, Mordona, Paian, Skylan, and Rynan, among others. Chewie gazed over the list of names, and shook his large, woolly head. He had been OVER many of these planets, had worked around most of their local governments, but had never landed on more than two or three. *A couple of weeks on a nice planet is just what I need. Somewhere I can just relax and be myself...* Where would be a good place to get off? Well, he'd just stay on, working if he had to, until he got some place he wanted to be.

\*

Very little happened in the first two weeks of the voyage. Chewbacca ingratiated himself with the crew of the *New Wave* in the dull moments of their duty tours. He wanted to know about the planets on their agenda. He learned that at each port the *New Wave* would pick up cargo destined for one or two stops later on, and deposit cargo picked up a stop or so back. It was an easy life: easy to deal with, easy to like, but boring if nothing happened.

Imperial ships kept tabs on them, but the *New Wave*'s papers were in order and her crew was left alone. Chewbacca found, to his surprise, that there were several hundred ships doing this same work all across the galaxy, all the time.

"I could take off on, say, Lyston, wait a week or two, and get on another ship doing this same route?" he asked the mate one day.

"Sure," the young man told him with a shrug. "People do it all the time. This fleet alone has forty-four big ships like the *New Wave* about two weeks apart around the circuit. Most of the cargoes are repeaters, always in demand."

Chewbacca left the ship on the third planet stop, Alderaan. He liked the place immensely at first. The weather was fine; the open terraces and parks, and the general friendliness of the people made him feel comfortable.

But then one day he visited the old Jedi Enclave grounds. Cooled pools of slag, now a permanent part of the terrain along with ghostly jutting beams and partially standing walls, testified to the ruthlessness of the new Empire.

Chewbacca found it depressing, a sad tale relating to people in a myth: the Jedi and the soldiers, the Clones and the Emperor, were all characters in a story that meant little to him, yet the aura of the Enclave was desolate and devoid of hope. Chewbacca wanted to avoid such scenes of desolation. He spent more and more time in the bars and the gambling establishments near the port.

Chewbacca's luck had become a byword along certain spacelanes, but on Alderaan, his luck deserted him. When Chewbacca found himself up against a small but powerful syndicate, in debt by a thousand credits that he did not have, he decided to move out. He sold his flitter and paid off his debts. He had just enough left to hop a freighter. He didn't care what his destination was, as long as he could work, gamble, and drink.

A new, smart-looking freighter called the *Twin Suns* was in port. When the Wookiee ordered a ticket, the bursar offered him free passage for guard duty. With nothing better to do, and a rapidly diminishing bank-roll, Chewbacca agreed.

Five planets later, Chewbacca discovered that the *Twin Suns* was under close surveillance by Imperial cruisers. The freighter was hauled to over Lucef and the cargo confiscated for some small --or imagined--error in the books; the crew was not detained at all.

"Now what am I going to do?" the captain moaned. "I have to get money from somewhere; or be ruined. There's no money to make the payroll, to pay damages--"

Chewbacca interrupted with the only obvious answer he could see. "Have you any experience in smuggling?"

The captain stopped short. "No. I've always been honest. I--"

"Never mind what you have been," the Wookiee told him. "I have been a smuggler for most of your lifetime." The gleam that came into the captain's eyes made Chewbacca grin.

Heading to Mayon, they eluded the Imperial cruiser still following. Taking a detour through hyperspace, they made the skies over Ustella in short order.



\*Wait here,\* Chewbacca took the emergency skimmer from the ship and headed downport. He soon picked up an old chum--Fox.

"You need something small, easy, and hot," Fox said knowingly after hearing the Wookiee's story. "And I got just the thing. Sit tight."

When Chewbacca got back to the freighter, he had all the wealth any of them could use tucked safely in the cargo hold of the flitter.

"What is it," the captain asked.

\*If I don't tell you, the Imperial worms can't force it out of you, can they?\* the Wookiee countered with a grin. \*You'll get your share when we get where we're going.\*

The captain scratched his head. He had obviously begun to worry about their current course of action, but Chewbacca knew, at least at the present time, he had no other option. "Where are we heading?" the captain asked.

\*Urt,\* Chewbacca told him. \*Wake me when we get there, and keep the crew away from the skimmer--it's mined.\* With a satisfied smile, the Wookiee headed for his cabin.

He was wakened when they made the skies over Urt. He pulled strings to get them through the Imperial net covering the port. With astonishing alacrity Chewbacca put the freighter into a docking bay, sold the flitter and its illicit contents to the highest bidder of among a small, highly select audience, and had advised the captain of the freighter to lift ship once more--quickly and quietly.

They were well out in space again before Chewbacca brought out a chit for one million credits and began to write drafts for each member of the *Twin Suns*'s crew.

"What was in that flitter, anyway," the captain demanded, seeing the size of the draft he was getting.

\*Drugs,\* Chewbacca replied calmly as he finished his calculations. His profit came out to a little less than 100,000 credits--enough to keep him solvent for a couple years at his present rate of gambling and standard of living. Of course, he'd have to stick to small games--

"Just drugs? For that kind of money?" The captain was awestruck. "What kind of drugs?"

\*I didn't ask,\* Chewbacca said testily. \*We'll stop on the next planet of your regular route and pretend nothing has happened.\*

They stopped on Bestine and had no trouble getting through the Imperial checks. Chewbacca bought a new 'hopper and stored it in the cargo hold of the *Twin Suns*--just in case.

And the captain bought a new emergency craft for the *Twin Suns*--just in case.

Chewbacca measured two new birthdays while working for the *Twin Suns*, and he was beginning to feel his age. He was, as man measured time, almost 190 years old...and it was time and more that he was settled. He told the captain so one day over breakfast.

"I'll miss you," the man told him. "But I think you're right. This isn't the life for you."

Chewbacca grumbled good-naturedly. "It is the only one I have ever found that pays this well."

"Yeah, and it's exciting as hell, but sometimes that's not enough."

Chewbacca had to agree.

The next planet they made port at was Rynan. Chewbacca had never officially signed on the crew of the *Twin Suns*, so he once more said his good-byes. Would this be a good place to settle? He took his personal flitter, brought it skillfully into port at Rylla, the planetary capital.

He stepped from the craft and was immediately approached by a city official with a dignified bearing and a quiet manner who addressed him in the common galactic language. "Welcome to Rynan," the human said with a smile. "What may be done to help you?"

\*I wish to settle here,\* Chewbacca said slowly in Kazeel. Would the human understand him? \*I have nothing but my flitter and my personal possessions, but I can work.\*

"Please come with me, then, and we will see what we can do. Your ship will be safe here." The man turned and walked toward the city; Chewbacca, feeling more ill at ease than he had in a long time, followed.

"Now," said the man when they were seated in his comfortable office, "what kind of work can you do?"

\*Anything,\* Chewbacca said, trying not to be intimidated. \*Mechanics, physical labor, pilot, hospital work...\* He wondered if he were saying too much. The man merely smiled.

"With a list like that, we should be able to find you *something*." He pulled some forms from his desk drawer. "What is your name?"

\*Chewbacca,\* the Wookiee grumbled. The man wrote it on the form.

"Last planet of residence?" he asked.

\*Um, well, uh...\* Chewbacca hesitated.



"Chewbacca," the man leaned back in his chair, "maybe you are not aware of what kind of planet Rynan is. Our senator, Nolec Faffston, has declared it free ground to runaway slaves, indentured servants, or any escaped criminals--so long as they can prove that they wish to work and wish to lead productive, trouble-free lives. We want beings to come here to start over; we believe they can start over." When the human smiled this time, Chewbacca found himself more at ease.

"Treganno," he mumbled, still somewhat embarrassed. "I worked in a hospital there."

"And do you have a mate or children that you wish to find or to bring here?"

"No," Chewbacca said, wishing he could say yes. Where was Ghahi now? Did she remember, too?

"All right, let's find you a place to stay while we find you a job."

The family he stayed with were an elderly Wookiee couple, and the job they found for him was in a local doctor's office. His life quickly settled into a routine. He tried to accept the odd turnings of his life philosophically. He drank, played cards, and gossiped with the young spacers who came to Rynan Port. There were many Wookiees on Rynan, and he dated several of the single females. He worked his way up to chief nurse and pup-carrier at the doctor's office; his past experiences helped immensely as he dealt with the problems of the young pups--Wookiee and human alike. The natives liked him, and he liked them and their welcoming world.

But after a couple years of settled happiness his eyes were drawn to the stars in the evening sky, and he wondered if that life weren't in his blood after all.

Rynan was at the intersection of several trade routes, and its ports were always busy. Imperial and interstellar gossip and rumors had a way of filtering down through the downport areas: rumors of strife in the Empire, of purges and mass murders. Refugees, some friends of the Rynan senator, some just seeking sanctuary and safety, poured into Rynan. They were welcomed, and helped to find homes and work.

It was no surprise to Chewbacca, when he arrived at his favorite bar for a wopen game on the second day of the Galactic New Year of 6096, to find that more was being discussed than the weather.

Pulling up a chair to the fringes of the game in progress, he listened to the rumors. Katka's gambling ring--the one that ran this and every other game on the planet--was being heavily leaned on by the Empire. Chewbacca, into the ring for a few thousand in credits, would have to find a

way to cover his tail--if he didn't want to owe money to the Empire.

This personal problem so engrossed him that he almost missed the story of the high Mayon official who had escaped to Rynan seconds before he was due to be arrested--and with the help of a Corellian smuggler, of all things!

Chewbacca was tapped on the shoulder by the barkeeper, a good friend.

"Hear the Corellian's got a freighter that takes two, and no mate," he said with a wink. "I know you're getting restless, and you've got the experience..."

"Thanks," the Wookiee growled. His mind played leap-frog. Was the Katka ring paying off to the Empire yet? He had no reason to support Imperial lackeys, even though he usually paid his debts. Did this Corellian--Corellian. Ugh! Another human! I should have kept my own ship! Well, I can always check it out...

Chewbacca stood with one hand on the bulkhead of a converted Mantor freighter, looking down at a semi-conscious young man lying in the hatchway.

He tried to remember everything he knew of Corellian independents. He didn't remember much--except that they were either totally unsuited to life in space, or totally dependent on it. This one could be either, or even both, and could use a good ace, if only so he wouldn't be left lying in in his own hatchway again.

A mere child, too, Chewbacca guessed, trying to figure out how old the Corellian was. 23, maybe, or 25. No older than that. And why they let pups like this out with ships... Chewbacca let his eyes linger on the battered hulk of the freighter. A piece of junk. Maybe I'd better leave the job to someone else...

The figure lying there groaned and stirred slightly. Chewbacca found himself feeling sorry for the Corellian. It wouldn't hurt just to talk to him. As he moved up the ramp, Chewbacca looked at the pitted hull and the strange modifications of the ship. Maybe it could fly, after all. As for the Corellian--Rowoonr had told him Treganno was a human world; now he was beginning to see that every world was a human world. He'd just have to learn to cope with it.

As he bent to help the Corellian to the ship, Chewbacca shook his head in bemusement. His life was running full circle. No matter how many times he tried to lead a quiet, planet-bound existence, he always returned to space and to the excitement of smuggling. He glanced down at the lean, youthful face of the battered Corellian independent. He snorted in derision. "And human or not, I always wind up taking care of pups still wet behind the ears." He shook his head once more. It was enough to make an honest Wookiee believe in fate.

THE END



# A SMALL DECISION OF DEATH BY SARAH LEIBOLD



I am the Captain.  
Mine command's power and glory.

Mine, also, overwhelming guilt and remorse  
one small, snap decision decreed for me.

*Dr. Leonard McCoy. Deceased.  
Casualty of localized border encounter...*

Hell. The circumstances are irrelevant.  
His death was of my deciding  
if not by my hand.  
He died well and with purpose  
by military standards,  
for we have won the battle--  
though I have lost a war.

I was not with him in those last terrifying moments  
when stark realization dawned that this time  
there wouldn't be any miraculous rescue.

No caring hands soothed...  
no loving gaze calmed...  
no compassionate words eased his death-drenched body.

I was too busy saving the many  
to lavish attention on the few,  
and space neither hears nor acknowledges  
the measure  
of a man's final searing moments.

Yet those moments are forever etched  
with crystalline clarity  
in my mind, and the bitter, acrid taste of grief and regret  
lie heavy on my tongue.  
For I upheld my rank and my duty--  
but failed myself and my friend.

*Dr. Leonard McCoy. Deceased.*





by

HANS DIETRICH

(with apologies to H.R. Giger)





ON MAY 25<sup>th</sup>, 1979, THE MOVIE WORLD  
MET A STRANGE NEW STAR; A NASTY  
MONSTER CALLED SIMPLY THE ALIEN,  
AND HE LOOKED LIKE THIS...

WHY MUST I  
ALWAYS BE  
PORTRAYED IN  
THIS STUPID  
MENACING  
POSE?



... LOOKED LIKE THIS...

THANK  
YOU!



HOWEVER...

THIS IS  
NEITHER  
HERE

NOR THERE

OR EVEN  
ANYWHERE

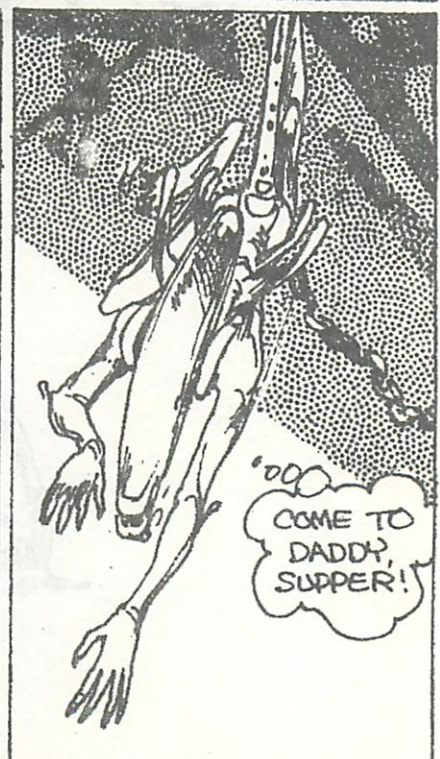
NOT WITH EVENTS ABOARD THE GOOD SHIP NOSTROMO PROCEEDING  
AS THEY ARE



JONES...?  
JONES...?



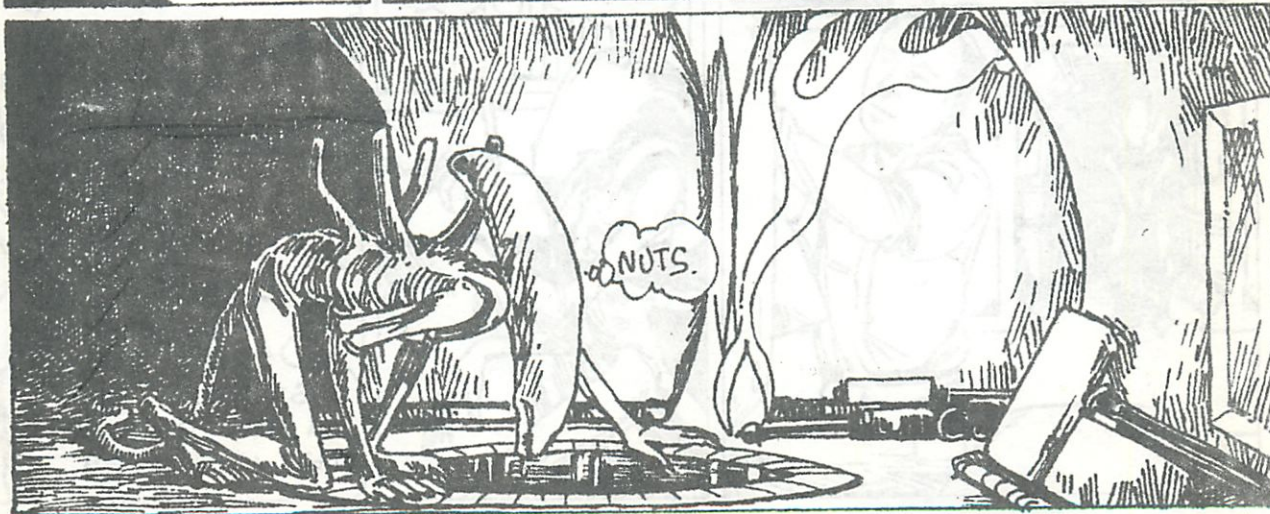
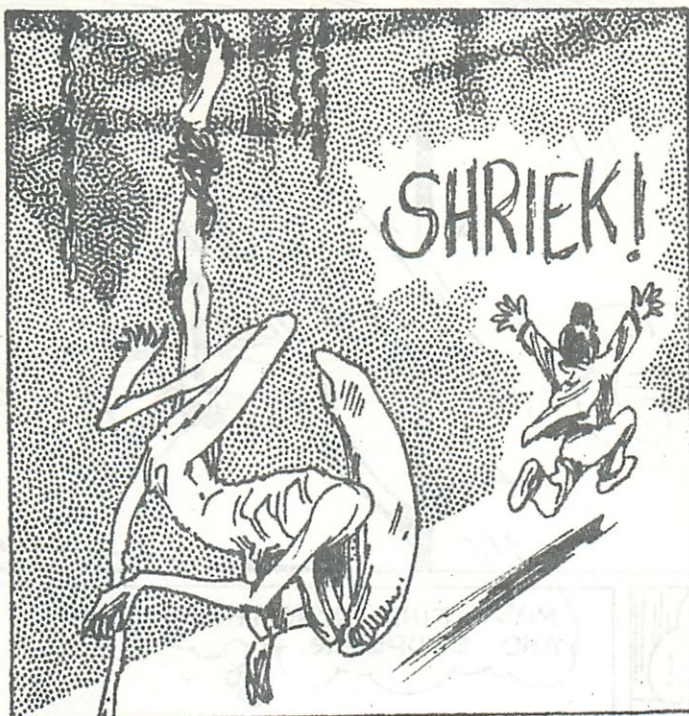
BOY OH BOY OH BOY!  
SNATCHING THIS DODO  
OUGHT TO BE A SNAP!



COME TO  
DADDY,  
SUPPER!

cont...





cont...



BUT THE ALIEN IS NOTHING  
IF NOT PERSISTENT...



PANT PANT... GOTTA START LAYING  
OFF THOSE DAMN KAF EXCESS  
CALORIES....!

OH



MUST FIND SOMETHING SLOWER  
AND STUPIDER.



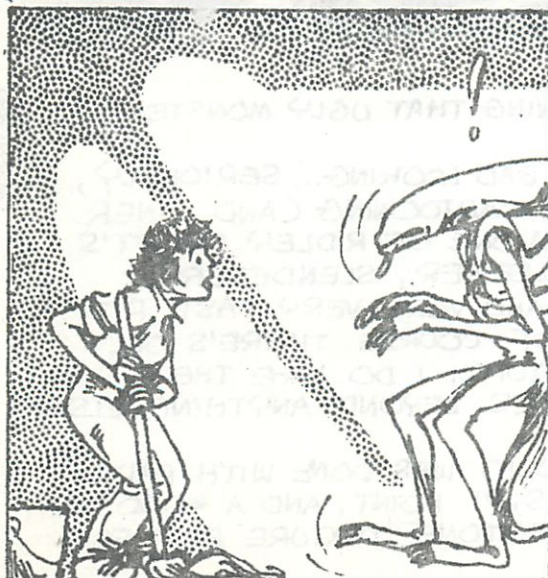
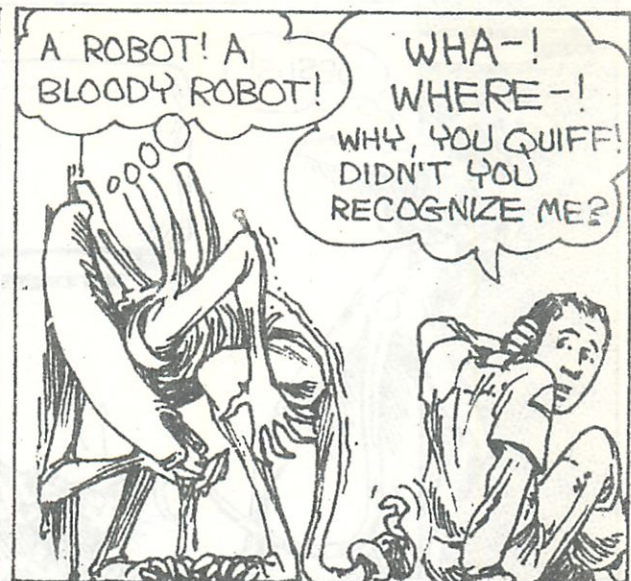
I WAS SAYING--?



LET'S SEE.....  
JUST ABOUT THERE  
ON THE BACK OF  
THE HEAD.....AH.....

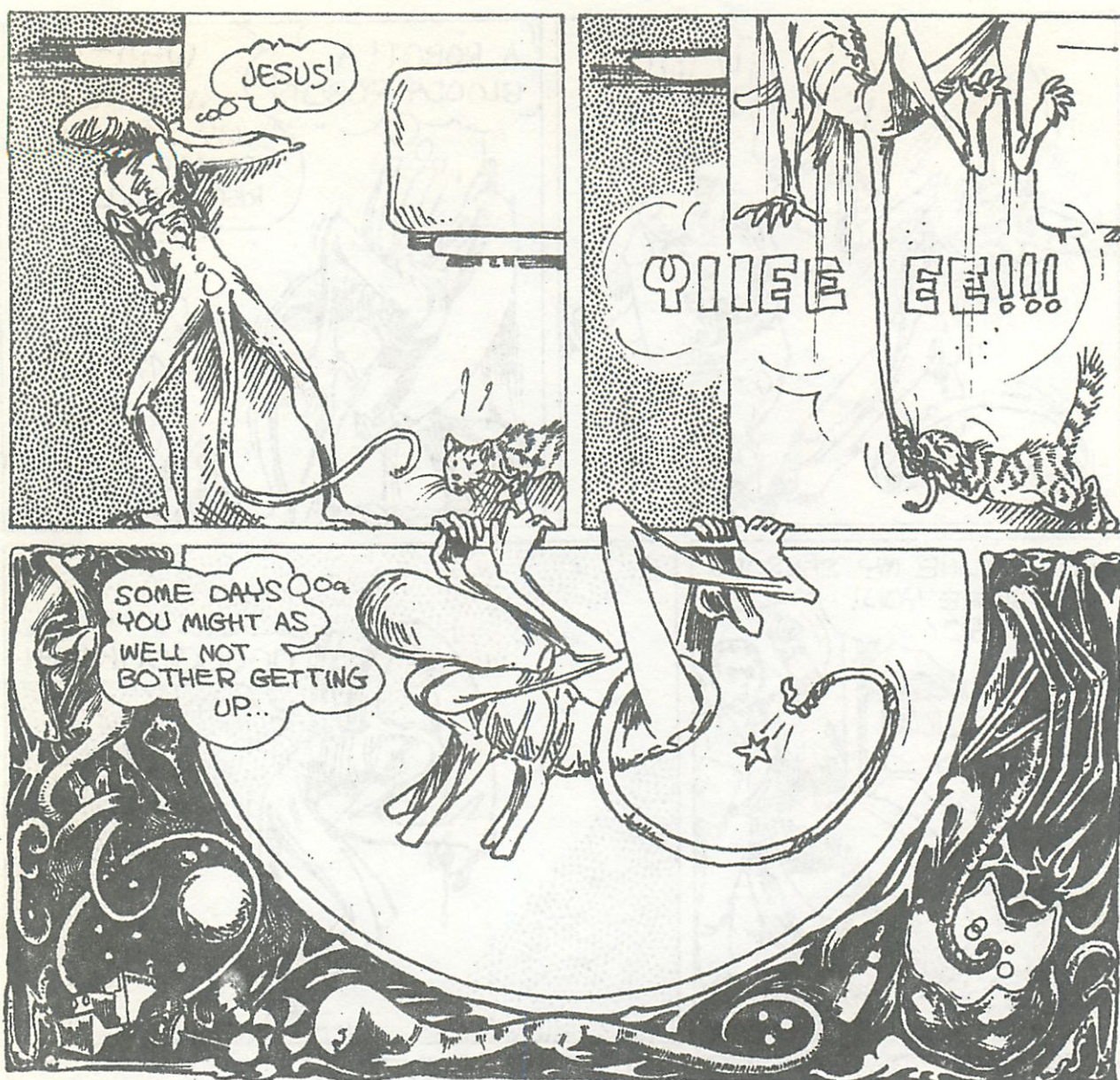
cont...





cont...





HOW CAN YOU WASTE YOUR TIME DRAWING THAT UGLY MONSTER?

OH, COME NOW. DALLAS ISN'T THAT BAD LOOKING... SERIOUSLY, THE ALIEN IS SIMPLY PERFECT FOR CARTOONING (AND FINER ARTS TOO). I LIKE TO DRAW FROM ONE OF RIDLEY SCOTT'S EARLIER CONCEPTS; THAT OF A SLEEKER, SLENDERER ANIMAL, FANTASTICALLY ACROBATIC AND VERY, VERY FAST. PITY A LOT OF THAT WAS LOST, BUT OF COURSE THERE'S ONLY SO MUCH ONE CAN DO WITH A COSTUME. I DO LIKE THE FINISHED DESIGN. IT IS STILL MILES BEYOND ANYTHING ELSE I'VE SEEN.....

THE BULK OF THE WORK IN THIS FOLIO WAS DONE WITH RAPIDOGRAPH MECHANICAL DRAFTING PENS; #1 POINT, AND A #000 POINT FOR THE FINER WORK. I USED PRESSTONE TEXTURE FILM FOR SOME OF THE SHADING.

Hama





# TAKER AT THE FLOOD

Karen Osman

There is a tide in the affairs of men,  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

Shakespeare, Julius Caesar IV, iii, 217

Trooper K4983/Y-clone VI shifted surreptitiously from one foot to the other. A chilly wind whistled past his audio-pickup. He looked to where Lord Darth Vader was deep in conversation with the Girimir chief. The alien was man-tall, heavily muscled, with a coarse grey pelt covering his shoulders, back, and legs, thinning to a pale down on his belly. Under a high-domed forehead were fierce yellow eyes and a long muzzle full of a seemingly impossible number of sharp teeth. Even in the cold, his only garment was a richly embroidered belt hung with a sword, a pouch, and various anonymous objects. His fingers flickered in an elaborate sign language, echoed more slowly by Vader's massive gloves.

Trooper K4983, also known as Raan, tongued the private frequency, trooper to trooper. "What do you suppose old fuzzy-face is babbling about? He sure is taking a long time."

"Who knows - who cares?" responded his year-clone, Petya. "We'll find out what Vader wants to tell us soon enough. Don't forget: 'curiosity wins no promotions'."

Raan nodded slightly at Petya's words. Promotion: that was the reason he had angled for this duty, although most troopers tried to avoid serving under the Dark Lord. Darth Vader wasn't one of those bureaucrats sitting on his fat ass back at Headquarters; when his guard went into a fight, he went with them. Wherever he went, there was plenty of action -- and Raan knew action led to promotion.

The Dark Lord finished his conversation with the alien and moved off with his long, arrogant strides. The troopers followed at a smart trot, and the transport crawled along behind at slow speed. Keeping time the while, Raan glanced curiously from side to side. This was only his second assignment, and the alien world fascinated him. Raan caught glimpses of brightly painted skin tents, naked cublings with wide eyes and pricked ears playing in the dust, a craftsman carefully fitting onto a spear shaft a precious metal point, traded, Raan knew, as was all forged metal on this planet, from the Empire. Older cubs practiced casting spears at a target and trading sword-strokes with training weapons, or squatted in a circle around a white-muzzled old warrior who was recounting some tale of past hunts or forays with wide gestures. And everywhere were the Aala, four-foot tall humanoids with soft brown fur and stubby-fingered paws, whom the Girimir held as slaves and bred for food in times of game shortages.

Vader stopped at one of the larger tents and ducked inside. His voice floated out, "Squad Leader, bring the men in." The officer waved two men aside to guard the transport. The rest crowded into the tent, tracking dust over the thick rugs of Aala hide which covered the floor. Vader placed his hands on his belt in a characteristic gesture, and began.

"Four days ago we intercepted a transmission from this planet's surface in the Rebel code. Eight days from today, a Rebel ship will



land with a cargo of modern weapons to arm the Aala for an uprising against the Girimir - and the Empire. We are fairly sure the Rebels do not know that we have broken their code, but unfortunately the transmission ended before we could get more than an approximate fix on the Rebel beacon. It is somewhere to the northwest of here, probably in the mountain chain just north of here.

"We must find that beacon and destroy it before the Rebel ship can home in on it." The metal breath screen dipped toward them and Raan flinched, felt his involuntary movement echoed by his brothers. "While we keep this planet primitive, we keep it ours. I will personally break any man who allows Imperial equipment or arms to fall into unauthorized hands." Raan suspected that the Dark Lord meant that literally. He had once seen him snap the back of a Rebel spy with nothing more than his hands. "Dismissed!" Raan followed his unit in thoughtful silence.

After the usual dismal field meal of ration concentrates, Raan and his fellow clones prepared for sleep in the tent assigned to them. They had removed their armor for comfort's sake and were now engaged in the soldier's perennial occupation of grousing.

"What a planet! Colder than a Sochi where's welcome the week after payday. Cosmos, this job's going to be a bitch. Why'd they send us out with a mucking platoon - we could have used a battalion!" Raan recognized the complaining whine of Seida, decanted six months earlier than he'd been.

"I think it's something hush-hush; that's why there's just the Personal Guard," Raan said.

"Well, I've got the feeling that something out there don't like me," Seida replied.

"Nah - that's just being unarmored out of barracks. Forget it. There are six guys out there, two on the transport and four on the tent. Nothing's going to get in here unannounced," Petya said.

"I don't know. Remember what happened on Caradinae?" A brief uneasy silence fell, and Seida turned hurriedly to a more general topic. "Why bother babysitting a bunch of fuzzies anyway? Let the Rebels have this ice-ball!"

"I don't know, but I'd guess minerals; that's all these dinky little worlds usually have," said Sarsi, another of Raan's year-brothers.

"But why the hush-hush, then? Why not come in in force?" asked Petya.

"Search me. Do you know, Sir?" Sarsi appealed to the Squad Leader.

The leader sighed. "When will you learn that Policy is none of your business? Your job is to shut up and do what you're told!" He looked around, shook his head. "Just to keep you quiet, this system is a protectorate of Alderaan, and Lord Vader says they're trying to set up a base here under the cover of the cultural embargo on primitives. You know what that means, right? We aren't supposed to be here 'officially' until the natives are developed enough to have a centralized government."

"Oh. Well, I guess he figures that the fewer of us there are, the less chance of dropping a rifle in some fuzzy's hot little paw," one of the troopers said.

"Speaking of hot little paws," Petya, bored with the subject of politics, began, "I remember my last leave on Sochi; there was this girl..." A chorus of groans greeted this opening. "Oh no, not that one again!" Raan settled back as similar tales, of equally dubious authenticity, went around the tent.

At last Seida leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially, "I wonder what he does for fun - Vader? Do they prop him up against the wall at night and turn down the power?" Several obscene suggestions followed.

Raan said thoughtfully, "They say he got pretty thoroughly fried years ago in some radiation accident. I guess..."

"Knock it off over there," the Squad Leader said. "It's a long walk tomorrow, so can it and get some sleep!"

"Yes, Sir!" the troopers responded and retreated into their sleeping bags. The tent grew silent.

Raan, feeling naked and vulnerable being outside the barracks without his armor, had barely fallen into a doze when the sound of running bare feet and shouts in the guttural Girimir language woke him with a start. Flickers of light danced across the tent walls as torches were carried by at a lope outside. Raan snatched for his rifle and sollarrets and was halfway into his impervium shell by the time a white helmet poked its way into the tent flap.

"Hang on - it's green."

"What's on the board?" the Squad Leader asked.

"A bunch of monkeys made a break, but the fuzzies got most of them back."

"Most of them?"

"A couple got away, I think. I don't know - who understands this fuzzy jabber?" the outside guard said.

"Vader. Anybody want to go wake him up for an explanation?"







"Not me! I'll wait to find out in the morning."

Through the open tent flap, Raan could see the Dark Lord striding through the camp at a pace that sent his black cape fluttering out behind him. He reached the tent. "Report, Trooper!"

The trooper's head disappeared outside of the tent with a jerk. He repeated his explanation in somewhat more professional terms. "I'm sorry, Lord Vader; I don't understand the language, so I didn't get a complete report."

"If any of the Aala escaped, the whole Rebel underground on this planet will know we're here! Next time stay alert!" Raan shuddered at the coldness in that deep voice, glad he was not the guard.

"Yes, Sir," the trooper muttered, but Darth Vader had already vanished in the direction of the chief's tent. Raan reholstered his weapon with a shrug. Whatever had happened, there was nothing he could do about it right now. The Squad Leader ordered the men to sleep again. Raan once more divested himself of his armor and composed himself for sleep with the fatalism of the professional soldier throughout the ages.

The next morning, by the time he downed a quick breakfast of concentrates and put on his armor, Raan was considerably more cheerful. But this lasted only until the platoon fell into formation in front of the transport. Raan recoiled slightly as he noticed that there was a rack of flayed and gutted bodies hung up like carcasses in a slaughterhouse in the space between two tents which had been empty the night before. Raan realized these were the bodies of the Aala who had failed to escape, hung up to age before being eaten. He swallowed, and reminded himself firmly that the Aala were the property of the Girimir - and rebels against them and against the Empire.

"Ten-hut!" Raan snapped to attention as Darth Vader swept down on the platoon. The icy wind whipped his dark robes about his figure, but he appeared not to notice. Anger showed in every line of his body, and Raan felt a coldness in his stomach. An angry Lord of the Sith was not something he wanted to face.

But Vader's anger was not directed at the trooper. "Two Aala were allowed to escape last night," the deep voice rumbled. "We do not know if they've made contact with the Rebels yet, but it's possible, so be on your guard for an attack. Move out."

The Squad Leader saluted and bawled orders. Troopers sprinted for the transport and settled themselves as comfortably as possible, rifles at hand, as it moved out toward the mountains. Darth Vader brought up the rear in his personal vehicle, an enclosed, armored, heavily-armed landspeeder painted a glossy black. Raan thought it projected something of the threatening air of its occupant. He found it a thoroughly nasty-looking machine.

Raan stared out at the passing landscape. He had been raised in crowded barracks and spaceship corridors, and so much open space was vaguely disturbing. Behind them sloped a vast treeless tundra, rippling with tall, grassy vegetation in the gold, russet, brown, and dull green colors of fall, dusted here and there with white patches of early snow. Above them was a blank arc of pale blue. The air in Raan's intake filter was cold and had a clean smell free of familiar pollutants. Aside from the little group of tents they had just left, there was no sign of habitation. Ahead there rose a jumble of foothills and beyond them, past another fjord of tundra thrusting into the chain, stood the true mountains, gigantic peaks crowned with snow.

"Why don't we just use flitters?" Raan wondered.

"Because, stupid," Petya, in the seat next to him, answered, "we'd never be able to pilot them at slow speed through those mountains. Air currents must be incredible up there."

Raan nodded his understanding. The transport trundled onward at its steady pace. Nothing broke the stillness but the sounds of their own passage and small noises vaguely like insect chirps or birdsong rising from the knee-high grass. Now and again they caught sight of small bands of large, hairy herdbeasts of some kind, grazing in the distance.

The transport ground upward toward the first pass through the foothills. The Dark Lord's command to halt jarred Raan out of the half-doze he'd fallen into. Vader stepped out of his vehicle and faced the pass. Its walls spread upward at a steep angle in a broken mass of rock and stunted grass, while the passage between was a narrow and wavering trail trampled out by generations of hooves.

"Something is wrong; I feel it." He turned to the Squad Leader. "Send out the scouts and check that pass. Go over every inch of the high ground."

"Yes, Lord Vader." The scouts spent a fruitless hour searching the top and sides of the pass. Raan, picking up some of Vader's unease, tried to scan the pass from where he sat on the crowded transport. His eyes passed over naked rock, depressions worn into the cliffs, matted grasses. He shook his head. He was too unfamiliar with this planet. He could not see anything out of the ordinary.

"Everything seems to be in order, Sir," the Squad Leader announced at last. "Shall we proceed?"

"Very well, but keep a sharp watch. This is a perfect place for an ambush."

The transport rumbled on at a slow crawl. The troopers crouched with rifles at the ready. Suddenly, the walls of the pass erupted in a mass of yelling, leaping brown forms as the Aala threw off the matted vegetation which had concealed them. They showered rocks and spears on the



troopers, and let loose an avalanche of huge boulders which rolled down on the transport in a thunderous rush. Here and there a laser-rifle sizzled as off-world Rebels hidden among the Aala joined in the attack.

"Get clear, get clear," the driver shouted as he tried to back the clumsy transport out of the fire zone. Troopers boiled out of it, jumping over the sides to run for the cover of the jumbled rocks and trying to snap off a shot whenever a target showed itself, which was seldom, for the Aala blended into the brown earth around them. The driver made perhaps half a dozen yards before a great chunk of rock crushed the transport. Troopers worked their way uphill from rock to rock, ducking and twisting. Again and again there was a cry as a small brown body tumbled down the slope. Less frequently, a white impervium shell crumpled and lay still.

Raan was not surprised when Lord Darth Vader took an active part in the melee. The Sith Lord kicked the black speeder into manual, shoved the antigrav down to "full" and gunned the vehicle up the tumbled wall of the pass in a maneuver most mechanics would not have believed possible in a heavy military machine. He steered a winding course between boulders, laying down a precise covering fire for the climbing men. Rainbow waves of energy sparked and crackled over the outer shield of the speeder as laser hits were deflected. Vader's armored speeder topped the hill; gyros whined and engines snarled in protest as Vader whipped it into a tight turn and lay heavy fire down the hill. Many of the Aala fled in seeming panic at this unexpected attack from the rear. Rebel soldiers rolled and twisted helplessly, trying to reach cover and return the fire at the same time.

Raan, part of the first wave of troopers, reached the top of the hill and charged over it. For several minutes Rebels and troopers exchanged energy bolts, then the outgunned Rebels slowly retreated, still firing. Darth Vader ordered, "No pursuit! Regroup! Don't get separated!" He then gunned his speeder and followed the retreating Rebels, bringing down one after another until they disappeared into a tangle of scrub on the slope too thick for the speeder to continue. As Raan watched, Vader turned his speeder and headed back to the battle site.

Raan looked around at the scene of destruction. The transport lay half-buried on its side, smoke and dark fluid seeping slowly from the ruins of its engines. White-clad bodies lay scattered across the hillside, and several troopers stood or sat with parts of their armor removed, nursing wounds. One trooper lay on the ground, the lower half of his body hidden by a large rock, and even as Vader pulled his speeder to a stop, a sharp crackle of energy from the Squad Leader's rifle put an end to his feeble movements. "Too badly injured to travel, Sir," the officer reported, and the Dark Lord nodded.

Raan shook his head in wonder. This had seemed so routine a job at first! Now eight troopers were dead on the slope, and three

others were wounded although still able to travel. Worse yet, several of the impervium shells had been damaged, and their life-support controls were now inoperable. Raan knew there was no hope of salvaging armor from the dead to replace these shells. Every human culture had its irrational superstitions. A clone had no family, no religion, no home, no name, and no value as an individual, but he clung with passionate determination to his armor. It was his only possession, his only identity. Over the generations, the white shell had attained the status of an "external soul" in clone folklore, and a trooper would die rather than use another man's armor.

The remaining troopers wasted no time on burials; the dead soldiers' impervium shells were grave and monument enough. The bandaged their wounded, salvaged what they could from the shattered transport, and hoisted makeshift packs on their shoulders as they gathered up the remaining weapons. The Squad Leader used a rifle to reduce the transport's guns and controls to slag so it would prove no use to the remaining Rebels if they returned. The little group then trudged on toward the mountains, followed by Darth Vader's speeder. As he contemplated the millions of steps yet before him, Raan sighed. But at least he was one of the lucky ones. His armor was still intact, and he was alive and unwounded.

Vader signalled a halt several hours later. The sky had turned a dull grey, and a bank of ominous clouds was building up over the mountains. The wind was bitter and Raan could sense that the soldiers whose life-support systems had failed were shivering violently with shock and cold. The battered shells provided some protection, but without temperature control were far from adequate.

One man limped heavily, another cradled a crushed arm, and Larsi, the third wounded trooper, collapsed in the sheltered area between the wall of the pass and the dark bulk of Vader's speeder. He clutched at his side, where a great dent marked his armor. Raan removed Larsi's helmet. He sighed when he saw that the froth which showed at the wounded man's lips as he breathed was faintly tinged with blood.

They made camp in the lee of the slope where the trail widened to form a shallow bay under an overhanging rock. Protected from above, with their backs against the hill, they felt reasonably secure. They hurried to build a fire out of scrub wood which, ignited with a laser burst, provided a little heat for their half-frozen comrades.

Raan approached the Squad Leader. "I don't think Larsi is going to make it, Sir, unless we can get him someplace warm. Are there any thermal bags?"

"The Squad Leader sighed. "No, the sleeping gear got buried when we were ambushed." He shook his head. "And if that's not bad enough, the concentrates and the Com were lost too." He



looked across at his men, turned back to Raan. "You'll have to do what you can for him, and for Jon and Mord tonight. Lord Vader says we should run into a tribe of fuzzies and get some furs tomorrow."

Raan looked nervously in the direction of the Dark Lord and lowered his voice. "Did he..."

The Squad Leader gave a short bark of laughter. "No, it isn't that mystical crap about some imaginary 'force'. He says this pass is the way all those big grazing animals we saw yesterday come down from the mountains for the winter, so all the fuzzy tribes gather along here to have their big hunt."

Water from a patch of snow higher on the slope produced a thin, but warming soup out of the last of the concentrates when warmed in a cuirass by a laser set on "stun". Raan tried to feed some to Larsi, the soldier with the crushed chest, but the injured man managed only a mouthful before he sank back with a groan. As he lowered the man's head gently to the ground, Raan noticed a damp spot on his armored hand. He looked up. A few snowflakes were drifting lazily down. Within minutes this had turned into a solid wall of falling snow. The campfire sputtered and went out. Like the herdbeasts in the valley below, the troopers gathered around their disabled comrades and turned their backs to the wind.

By first light the snow had died and it was colder. Mercifully, Larsi was at last dead. There were no provisions left. Hungry, cramped from sleeping in his shell, Raan struggled to his feet. He looked around. The others also struggled up. The squad gathered in a ragged column and the Leader signalled them to start. Vader's speeder floated easily above the snow as Raan and the troopers floundered, cursing, through the knee-high drifts. They halted frequently as they struggled downward toward the foot of the pass. They thrashed through snowbanks over crusted hillocks. At last the trooper with the injured leg fell. Raan looked despairingly from the fallen soldier to the Dark Lord's machine, but his tentative hope died almost as it was born. Darth Vader's speeder was a streamlined fighting machine with a driver's seat designed like the cockpit of his TIE fighter: there was no room for a passenger. The Squad Leader went to the crippled man and stood over him. The man stared up at him, breathing hard. Then Vader's voice crackled over the receiver and the Squad Leader turned reluctantly to his duty. Leaning down, he touched the helmet gently in a ritual gesture: "Do you accept this death at my hand?"

The trooper nodded wearily. "I accept the Gift and hold you guiltless."

"Go in peace, Brother, with the Gift." The Leader's rifle hissed and the injured man was dead. Raan glanced quickly in Vader's direction to see if he had noticed the exchange between the Squad Leader and the wounded man. The Gift of Passing was for the clones alone. To the Others their deaths were meaningless, the deaths of cattle bred in the tanks for that purpose; but

they would not let one of their own go without farewell. Raan could get no clue from Vader's mask, however.

The platoon, now reduced to eleven men - one wounded, several freezing, and all hungry and tired - fought on through the deep snow. At last they approached the top of a small rise. The scout gave a shout; the others hurried to the crest of the hill. Raan closed his eyes thankfully. Below them, where the pass began to widen out into the tundra plain, stood a tiny group of Gimir tents. The troopers began to cheer, then stopped abruptly as Darth Vader held up a hand. They looked again. There were only five ragged tents, their paint faded and cracked. A few tattered streamers dangled limply from the lodgepoles, like the last feathers of a molting bird. The painted designs looked nothing like the ones on the tents they had seen in the other Gimir camp, and the pot hung over the meager fire was made of clay, not metal. This was obviously a tribe unrelated to their allies, a tribe that had never traded with the Empire for the precious forged metal.

Even as they stood there, a half-grown cub who had been foraging part way up the hill caught sight of them. For a moment it stood frozen, then turned and sprinted down the hill, crying hysterically for help. Four or five shabby Gimir warriors, armed with flint-tipped spears, gathered in front of the tents. For a space, the two small bands eyed each other warily.

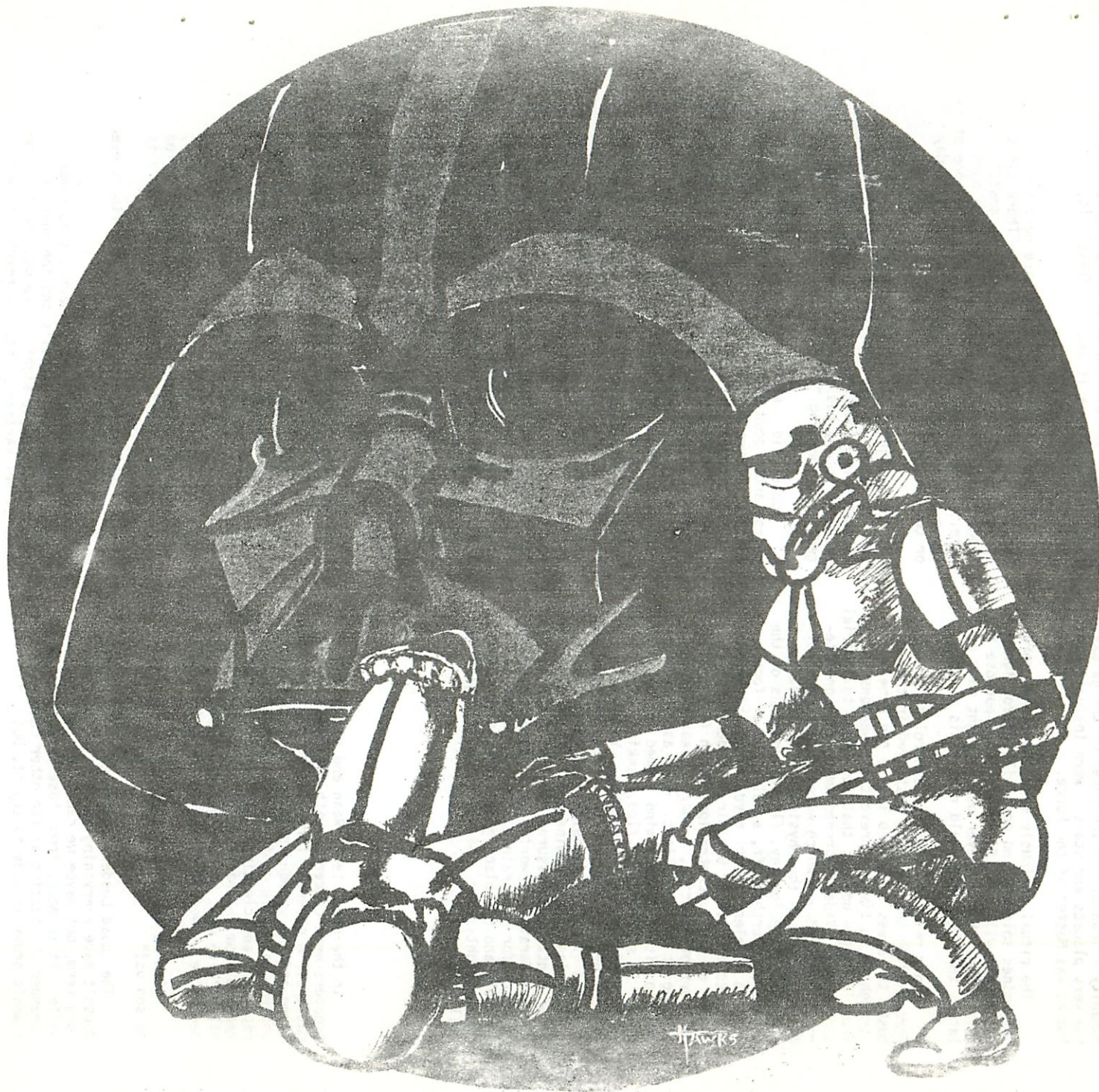
Then one of the Gimir ran toward the troopers, threw his spear, and scuttled back as the point clattered uselessly on the impervious shell. When there was no immediate response, the warriors advanced slowly with their spears poised.

All Raan could think of was the warmth and shelter they'd been promised that was now being denied them by this band of pathetic savages. And he 'knew' with a curious certainty that came to him at such moments as this that his brothers shared his angry frustration.

Hardly needing the command of "Forward!" from their officer, the troopers charged down the hill as one man, rifles flaming. The Gimir threw their useless spears and advanced with flint daggers drawn. Within five minutes the miserable defenders were crisped in front of their tents, while the females and cubs were scattered in all directions. The troopers did not bother with pursuit, but took possession of their unimposing prize. Raan nodded. Warmth and shelter, of sorts, would be theirs this night. He glanced at Darth Vader. After a few words to the Squad Leader, the Dark Lord entered the least battered tent. Raan found himself wondering what preparations the Sith lord would be making this night. He shrugged. Doubtless he would never know.

In his tent, the Dark Lord mused, and something that might have been an ironic smile if it







had been visible moved under his mask as he thought of the clone ritual he had watched earlier. What if he should tell the human commanders that their assembly-line tin soldiers were developing original thoughts? But a Dark Lord of the Sith owed loyalty to no one as insignificant as a regional governor, or even an Emperor. Next to the power of the Force, all humanity - indeed, all the races of the galaxy, the very planets and stars - were insignificant. And he was Master of the Force.

The ritual obviously made the clones more determined soldiers and more willing to fight and die at his will, and for his present purpose that was enough. For whatever use he might make of it later, the knowledge would remain his alone.

Vader relaxed conscious control of the Force. With the Com unit destroyed in the ambush, there was no way to locate the Rebel stronghold in time to prevent the weapons ship from landing - no way, that is, known to Imperial technology. Vader searched among the non-material energy shapes which were the analogues of living beings in the physical world. Nearby there were the low-key, flickering minds of the troopers. Further off, a dull, out-of-focus glow in nameless colors revealed the non-human presence of Aala or Gimir. Suddenly, at the limits of his concentration, Darth felt a different sort of identity, a sharp, clear mind like a pinpoint of white light. Even as he became aware of it, the other mind seemed to feel him as well. It startled and fled, winking out to leave only a faint mental afterimage. Vader felt a fierce surge of satisfaction - a Rebel mind, and the mind of a Force-sensitive at that! There was no question that the mind could escape him. The brief contact had assured him that the sensitive, while moderately powerful, was inexperienced and no match for his trained powers. He smiled savagely and one black glove strayed to the hilt of his light-saber. He would find it again and follow it.

In the other tent, Raan and his fellow troopers were concerned with more mundane matters. A cheerful fire blazed on the hearthstone and the wounded soldiers lay comfortably under a warm pile of furs. The men worked on repairing and cleaning their battered armor. One emerged from the back of the tent with a skin bag filled with what was obviously dried strips of meat. He showed it to the Squad Leader.

"Can we eat this fuzzy stuff? Will it poison us?"

The Squad Leader considered. "It probably doesn't have everything we need to stay healthy long term, but maybe we can live on it for a while. It is meat, from those herdbeasts; I remember the fuzzies at the other camp eating it. I won't order anybody to try it, but..."

"Well, said Petya with a shrug, "I'd rather die with a full belly than an empty one. I'll try the stuff." He took a chunk and began

chewing vigorously. "Hey! This is good!"

Several of the others tried it, while Raan and the more cautious waited to see the result. Some hours passed without any noticeable reaction on the part of the guinea pigs, and at last the rest ate also. The wounded men seemed stronger almost immediately. There was hardly enough for all of them, and all too soon Seida upended the container and shook it sadly. "That's it, no more."

"I can see why the fuzzies are here to hunt," Raan remarked in annoyance. "There isn't enough in this tent to feed a starving gnat." Suddenly he realized, "If the fuzzies can hunt here, why can't we? I'll bet we could get one of those animals easy. That ought to last us a day or two at least."

"All right," the Squad Leader said. "I'll ask Lord Vader for permission to stop somewhere along the way tomorrow and shoot one. That is, provided nobody has curled up and died of indigestion by morning."

Nobody did. A meal, a chance to make repairs, and a good night's sleep restored the platoon to much of its original spirit. The injured trooper's arm had been set and disinfected. The temperature controls on the damaged impervium shields were jury-rigged to hold for at least a while. They had won a battle on this world, no matter how small a one, and there was the prospect of real, if alien, steak for dinner. Bright sun sparkled off the snow, which was hardly more than ankle-deep now that they were out of the pass with its high walls which trapped the drifts. Here the fierce winds of the storm had driven the snow before them, and in places had scoured the ground almost bare. Brown patches were beginning to appear where the thinnest layer melted under the renewed sunlight. The crisp air sang in their heads and, although Raan had no idea where they were going, nor how they would fulfill their mission, nor even how they would get off this planet, his heart lifted. He broke into a cheerful marching song as they moved out, and the other troopers joined in lustily:

Soldiers of the Empire, we answer Duty's call.  
The Emperor, our master, he is the Lord of all.  
We are his mighty sword-arm, and to him we belong:  
We bear the Empire's burdens, we keep the Empire strong.

Soldiers of the Empire, wherever we may go,  
No enemy confounds us, we conquer every foe.  
Our name, it is the Empire's - our glory is our own:  
A fighting band of brothers, the finest ever known.

About midmorning they reached a half-way point between the foothills and the mountain pass. Raan caught sight of the main herd. From this closer vantage point, the herdbeasts were rather intimidating. They had broad heads with sweeping spatulate horns, heavy shoulders covered with ropes of hair and blocky bodies standing as



tall as a man at the shoulders. The herd reached almost across the horizon.

The group halted while the Squad Leader conferred with Darth Vader. Then he returned to his men, saying, "It's a green, Jor. You've had the most experience as a scout, so go get our steak dinner. The rest of you, wait here."

Slowly, the trooper crept toward the wide herd; only a faint ripple in the grass betrayed his passing. But, though Jor may have been their best scout, he was no hunter.

Raan, standing near Lord Vader's speeder, heard the Dark Lord's muttered comments. "You fool. Get downwind!"

The ripple moved gradually toward the animals, a few of which had lifted their heads and were regarding it with disquiet. Nostrils expanded and horns tossed as the beasts caught the strange scent. The lead cow lowered her head and gave a tentative scrape with one front hoof; by now the entire herd was lowing uneasily. There was a crackle of laser fire and one animal fell. Those closest to it half-reared with startled snorts, and instantly the herd was in full stampede. As the outer beasts wheeled on the edge of the herd, they ran over the spot where Jor lay and rushed down on the troopers in a hairy wall. Raan looked around in desperation, but there was no cover in which to hide. Nothing but prairie extended in every direction. Grass rippled on to the horizon until it broke against the foothills some miles away. Not a rock, not a tree, rose above the plain. Several troopers turned to bolt.

Darth Vader's voice cut through the sound of the oncoming herd. "Stand where you are!" The habit of instant obedience won over panic. The Dark Lord stood motionless, only his harsh breathing showing that he was still alive. A sensation like a faint mental tickling began in the back of Raan's mind. It grew, a pressure pushing harder and harder against some invisible barrier, until it became almost unbearable and Raan put his hands over his "ears" in an instinctive gesture, as if to shut out the silent sound. Suddenly the pressure broke through and Raan fell back as a wall of roaring flame sprang up in front of him, higher than his head. The heat drove him back, scorching even through the armor. He flung his hands out, stumbled backward and fell.

The leading animals of the stampede reared with screams of fear, fighting the pressure of the herd behind them. For an endless instant there was a milling, fighting mass of animals in front of the fire wall, with hooves striking wildly and rearing beasts bowled over, thrust down, and trampled by those behind them. Then gradually the herd was turned and streamed away off into the limitless sea of grass, away from the mountains. As the last animal ran past, the wall of flames abruptly died. Raan stared in disbelief. There was no sign of fire damage; the grass was not even brown. A faint sound, perhaps a sigh, escaped from Vader's breath mask and his rigid figure relaxed slightly.

Five or six animals, several still twitching and kicking, lay in a mangled heap on the ground. As Raan and his comrades stumbled to their feet, Petya remarked, "Well, it looks like we have meat tonight." Raan looked at him suspiciously, half suspecting that Petya, for the first time since the hatching tanks, had made a joke. But the other's face as he took off his helmet to wipe the sweat from his eyes was, as usual, blankly serious.

It took a good part of the day for the inexperienced troopers to butcher the fallen herd-beasts and prepare the meal for travel. Smoking was impossible in the stands of dry grass, there was no handy salt-lick nearby, and ordinary freezing or drying was certainly not practical. But after considerable thought and experiment, they found that a sort of quick-dried jerky could be created by standing back, opening the laser aperture of a spare rifle to the fullest, and giving the strips of meat a short burst of drying energy. The result was something between a length of wrought-iron bar and a bit of under-tanned shoe sole, but it would sustain them for some time when softened and boiled up with hot water or diligently chewed. It became obvious that the process was going to take a while. Straightening his cramped muscles, Raan watched with interest as Darth Vader called the Squad Leader over. "Have the men set up camp," the Dark Lord's voice carried to the troopers.

The Squad Leader ventured a question. "Lord Vader, if we have only four more days to locate the Rebel spacefield, do we have the time? Shall I send out scouts, or..." On the word "scout" his voice changed slightly. Raan knew he was remembering the tiny shards of white impervium and damp grass which had been all that was left of Jor.

Vader turned his metallic stare on the Squad Leader and answered in a tone of finality, "Attend to your men, Squad Leader; they must be ready when we attack. As for finding the Rebels, leave that to me. I have - my own methods."

The Squad Leader bowed obediently. He set the troopers to re-erecting the two tents they had dismantled and carried laboriously from the last camp, an objective achieved only with a vast amount of wasted time and motion. But at last the two skin tents stood relatively vertical and the men completed repairs and preparations for the assault on the mountains.

Meanwhile, the Dark Lord engaged in his own preparations. Loosing his consciousness, he sent his mind out to stalk the world of the Force, damping his own presence and searching, searching for the faint identity he remembered from his brief contact earlier, the Rebel mind. There it was! Again it tried clumsily to evade him, but this time Vader pursued it as it fled.



Each projected himself into the not-world as he saw himself mentally, and visualized mental energy as a weapon. For Vader, it was the blade he wore in the mundane reality, the light-saber that was symbol of Jedi rank and training. He strode through the not-world in the semblance of an ice giant from his home world's mythology, the robes of a Dark Lord of the Sith fluttering behind him in an imagined wind, and the fair face he had worn as a young Jedi - the face now ruined and hidden under the breath screen - grimly set. In his mental hand was a beam of white-hot fire that smoked and dripped sheets of flame like a bar of burning magnesium, forever unconsumed. Before him fled a white wisp, only half formed, for the Rebel had not travelled consciously in the other world often enough to develop a complete self-image.

Each tried to shape the formless stuff of the Force to his own pattern, the Rebel to create a landscape where he could hide and Vader to form a barrier the Rebel could not cross. The Dark Lord flung up a high basalt cliff with a gesture, then another parallel to it. The Rebel fled through the rapidly closing gap as the two narrowed toward a V-shape, and Vader followed. With a palm-out "stop" he slammed a box canyon wall across the end.

The Rebel tried to take a new shape as a bird-like creature, but the Dark Lord threw a net over the top of the canyon. The Rebel then pressed his full force against the barrier, and for a moment the canyon wall wavered and thinned. Another gesture by the Dark Lord solidified it, and a series of quick chopping motions planed the walls and thickened the net to a smooth roof, creating a box of black polished stone dimly lit by an unidentified glow. Reflected in the mirror-like walls, Darth Vader's light-saber wove a flickering pattern.

With escape blocked, the Rebel turned, raising a shield and a sword of dim blue energy. Darth Vader, as a fully-trained Jedi, rejected a shield as a coward's defense, depending on his skill alone to ward off the enemy sword strokes. Vader feinted right and low to draw the Rebel's shield, then reversed left and upward in a stroke awkwardly blocked by the Rebel's sword as he leaped back, only to have Vader's blade narrowly miss removing his head with a sidewise snap of the wrist. In a smooth, flowing motion, Darth brought his blade down again to block the Rebel's answering stroke. So it went - feint, stroke, parry, stroke - as the Dark Lord sized up the Rebel's inept attack. Tiring of the unequal game, the Sith Lord feinted to lead the Rebel's sword. As the other overextended his stroke, Vader's smoking saber slashed down to cut off his sword-hand, whipped sideways to knock the shield aside, and pinioned him with the point of the beam an inch from his mental heart. "Open your mind to me!" Vader commanded, and the helpless Rebel surrendered his will to the Sith Lord.

In a series of wordless images, Darth Vader saw the trail into the hills and the journey through the heights to the small valley where the Rebels had constructed a crude docking bay. Quickly, Vader took note of the Rebel's armament,

their numbers and defenses, and the location of the vital Com unit which would call down the Rebel weapon ship on its way with laser rifles and troops to aid the Aala in their coming uprising. Satisfied, Vader nodded. Then, with savage mental force, he wrenched the Rebel's soul loose from its physical moorings and crushed it. In the Rebel stronghold, the body of the Force-sensitive fell as the mind was ripped out of it. Vader knew that for a few minutes the mewling thing that had aspired to the Force would move aimlessly; then, without a mind, its body would also die. To his fellow Rebels, the Force-sensitive would seem to have suffered a sudden heart attack. They would have no warning that their plans and their hidden base had been discovered. Vader intended to make sure that they received none.

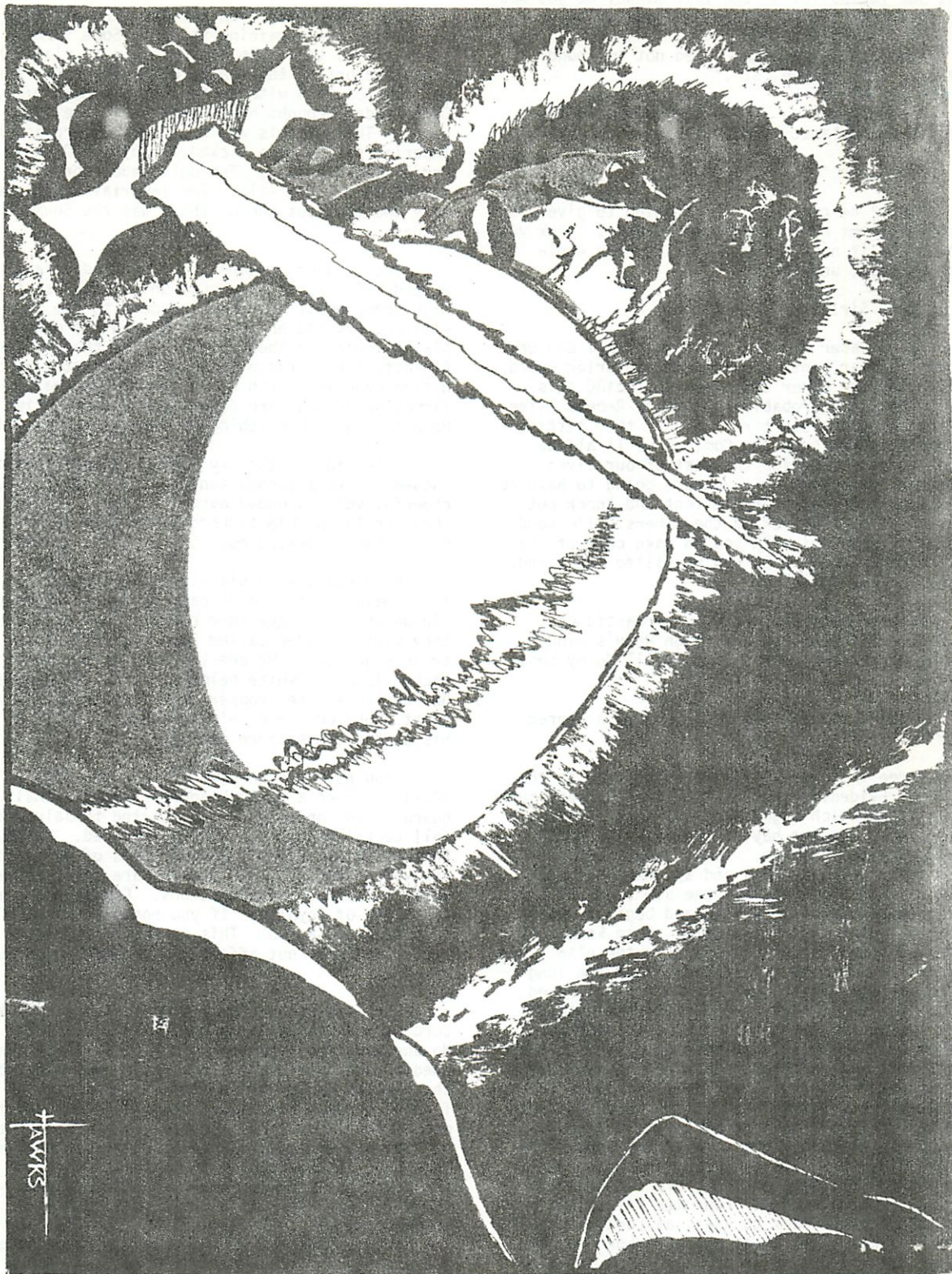
The next morning, Darth Vader addressed the troopers as they prepared to move out. "The Rebels believe that without our Com unit we cannot locate their base. They have set the Aala to watch us, however, and report our progress, and they are reassured that we do not seem to be travelling in the right direction. But now we must disappear. I want scouts out at all times, and I want no Aala to live to tell the Rebels where we have gone. Fail in this and those of you who escape the Rebels will have to deal with me!" Roan shivered. The prospect was not attractive.

The platoon turned sharply north, searching for the pass Vader had seen in the dead Rebel's mind. They flitted through the tall grass like shadows and disappeared into the mountain range. Vader reduced the anti-grav level on his speeder to a minimum, and slipped along the surface of the high vegetation like a fish through shallow water so that only a faint wake showed his passage. One by one, the Aala trailing them were uncovered and removed. Raan knew this was partly with Vader's aid, for the Dark Lord sensed their alien presence though he could not locate them exactly. For the rest, Raan and his fellows had been trained in on-planet commando tactics, and now had a chance to make use of that training. Raan accounted for two of the Aala and, demonstrated an excellent and rapidly growing ability in the field.

It took them two days to work their way into the mountains, two days without rest, hot food, or water except for snow-melt. They caught a few hours sleep in armor on the second night, but otherwise it was an endless scramble up and down rocky slopes on a cautious, invisible progress inward. Just before dawn on the third day they waited at the edge of the hidden Rebel valley, ready for the final assault.

The Squad Leader gave them final instructions over the audio-pickup, rather than the transmitter frequency which might be monitored by the Rebels. He divided his men carefully, sending the four best woodsmen to take care of the four guards keeping watch over the camp. He considered for a moment, then said, "Raan, I know







this is only your second mission, but I have been really pleased with the way you are shaking down. That job you pulled on the last monkey we got was one of the nicest I've seen in a while."

Raan looked down and tried not to sound pleased. "Thank you, Sir."

"Don't get smug. It's a good way to die quickly on a planet like this."

"Yes, Sir."

"But," he continued, "I'm going to give you the tough spot on this attack because I think you can handle it now. If you blow it, the whole mission goes, understand?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Lord Vader tells me that the Rebel Com unit is in that far tent, and that the interior guard will be on the other side from us facing this way. There are probably some other Rebels asleep in the tent. We can't risk any of them getting a chance to smash up the Com, or we'll all be stuck on this rock for the rest of our lives, which won't be long. So you are going to have to crawl under the edge of the tent and knock out that guard without waking the others. I'm sending Petya and Casi with you to take care of the rest of the Rebels when you've killed the guard. Think you can do it?"

Several possible answers, sarcastic or heroic by turns, flitted through Raan's mind, but he contented himself with, "I'll do my best, Sir."

"You'd better," the Squad Leader answered shortly.

Three imitation Girimir tents stood in the valley. Evidently the Rebels hoped that any survey flitter which might pass over would miss the camouflaged docking bay and believe the small encampment was genuine. Darth Vader had told them that fifteen Rebels and an unknown number of Aala were in the base. In the dim light of predawn, the troopers separated and began to work their way down toward the camp. Raan knew that each was intent on his own part in the plan. One by one, the guards, half-asleep after the long and uneventful night's watch, were overpowered and silently killed, garroted with a length of wire from a trooper's belt-pack or struck down with a well-placed blow. Hardly a sound escaped them, nothing loud enough to wake the camp below. Raan, Casi, and Petya moved quietly toward the farthest tent. With Petya at the ready beside the tent flap and Casi on the far side, Raan wormed his way under the edge of the tent. One of the sleeping Rebels stirred, and Raan froze, but the sound attracted the guard's attention for the time he needed. Four men lay asleep and one sat with his back to Raan, as Lord Vader had said. Raan's estimate of the Dark Lord and his mysterious sources of information went up a notch. Again the length of wire produced the desired effect, and the single interior guard went the way of the exterior ones. A quick whisper signalled Petya and Casi. At the sound,

the remaining Rebels started from sleep, only to find three Imperial rifles pointed down at them.

The rifle fire from the Com tent was the signal for the remaining troops. Some turned their rifles to a thin cutting beam to slash the lines supporting the tents, while their comrades set them on fire with a wide burst. Meanwhile, Darth Vader brought his speeder down the steep slope. Those Rebels who escaped the fire and the Imperial rifles were picked off by the Dark Lord's heavier guns. The only Rebel forces to escape were a few Aala. The Imperial losses were only two men, but one of those was the Squad Leader.

The troopers cleared away the bodies and waited. On the captured Com unit, Vader sent a high-speed burst of scrambled code to the Imperial cruiser hidden in orbit around the next planet inward in the system. Still they waited. At last, the approaching Rebel ship sent a recognition code and Darth Vader tapped out the confirmation he had torn from the Force-sensitive Rebel's mind. Everything as planned; come on in.

A section of the sky above Raan brightened suddenly like a second sunrise. Moments later, a cheerful voice sounded over the Imperial channel: "Cruiser Invincible to Lord Darth Vader. The Rebel ship is destroyed. Stand by for pickup."

Raan stood with his six clone-brothers in the remains of the Rebel camp to await the shuttle which would take them back to their ship. As they waited, Vader called Raan over with a brusque gesture. He checked Raan's ID number, etched into his white helmet. For a few minutes he considered the trooper in silence. A film of sweat broke out on Raan's forehead in spite of his suit's temperature control.

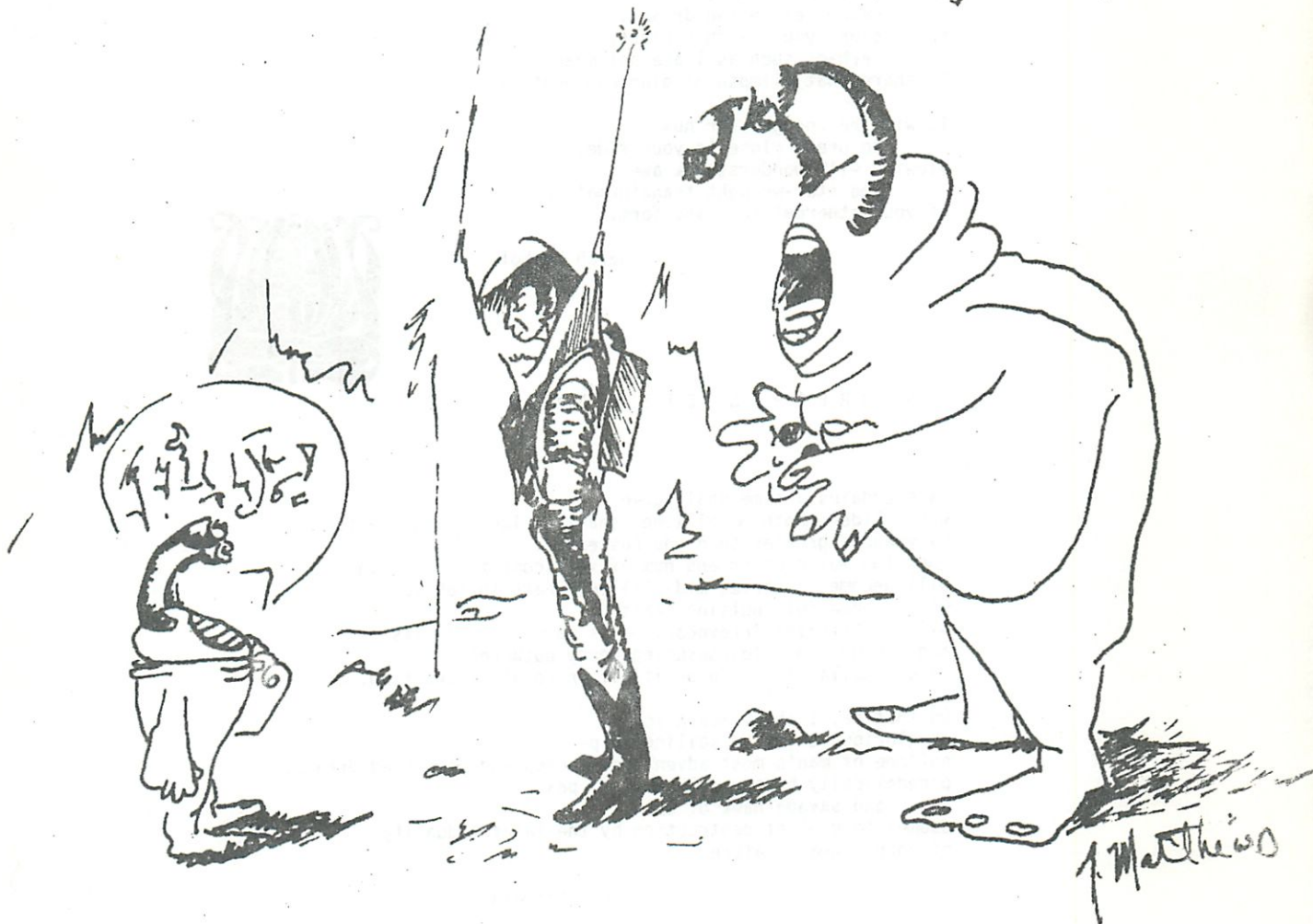
"You have proven yourself a good soldier, K4983. I need a Squad Leader for my personal guard." In confusion, Raan started to salute and fall back into ranks. Vader continued. "Wait, that is not an order. The officers of my guard are volunteers. I want men who are loyal to me above all other considerations. Can you give me that kind of loyalty? If you honestly cannot, feel free to say so. This is entirely off the record and will not affect your report in any way."

Raan was silent for a time, while the Dark Lord waited with an uncharacteristic patience. No one had ever asked for his loyalty before; his obedience had been assumed since he emerged from the tanks. The events of the last few days flashed through his mind: Vader's defense of his men at the ambush, his indifference to the death of Jor, his wizard's turning of the stampede, his knowledge of the Rebel guard's position inside the tent, his strange goals which no one understood, unlike the simple ambition of the other commanders, his tactical ability, the death of the crippled soldier in the pass... But no one had ever asked him anything before, and clones were always expendable. The best he could hope for was a leader who was wise enough not to waste their deaths. Suddenly he grinned within his helmet. What more could a clone ask than a good



fight, a good commander, and a little glory?  
Wherever Vader went, he would have them! Raan  
snapped his best parade salute, "My Lord, I am  
proud to serve you!"

The Dark Lord acknowledged the salute and  
turned away to enter the Imperial shuttle. In a  
minute he had forgotten Raan entirely.



"My insurance? Vulcan Mutual, of course."



## VISIONARY

Dreaming eyes fixed on the stars,  
what do you see?  
We sit here together: shoulders; thighs touching.  
I am here, and you are...where?

I long with almost frantic yearning  
to see as you see;  
to be part of that private, magic world.  
I stare at the glittering heavens  
until my eyes ache, my brain numbs,  
but they are still only stars.

Prophet of the future,  
never let go the dreams,  
the visions you see this night.  
Perhaps such as I are not meant  
to share that glimpse of glorious destiny.

It will be enough--for now--  
to press close to your side,  
viewing with wonderstruck awe  
the star-wrought transformation  
of your ethereal face and form.

Sarah Leibold



## A DREAM'S DESTINY

Fate ordains a time shall come  
when glide-smooth metal wings shall be lanced and shattered  
by weapons greater than you possess...  
when the muted chirr and hum of your computerized song  
will become an eerie, mid-chilling death shriek...  
when a powerful, pulsing heart  
will overstrain--irrevocably--its warp-drive limits  
and explode in life-consuming agony outwards  
before collapsing in upon itself in total destruction.

On that day I shall mourn you,  
oh glorious silvered sailing-ship--  
epitome of man's most adventurous hopes and cherished dreams,  
paradoxically both gentle dove of peace  
and savage hawk of war,  
doomed to violent destruction by the fateful duality  
of your manmade nature.

Sarah Leibold



# THE BOOK OF THE WORD Given by the Lords of Kobol

Emon Pa-Neteru

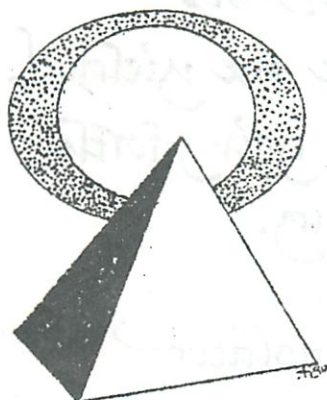
EXCERPTS COMPRISING ~

The Introduction

The Script of the Elders

The Hymns of Emon

Sayings of Emon



Deciphered & Translated  
by

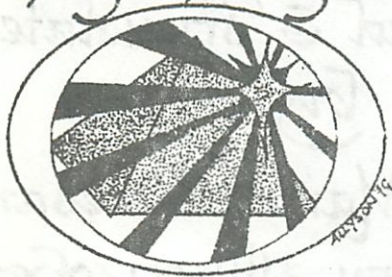
Angela-Marie Varesano  
INSCRIBED BY allyson cobblefield



## Introduction

Emon Par Neteru, Third Ruler of Kobol, was one of the most honored and respected figures in the history of that planet. Lawgiver, religious leader, seer, Emon reigned for nearly 85 yarens. In the 17<sup>th</sup> yaren of rulership, Emon attained the highest grade in the Mysteries of Kobol, the grade of Servant of the 10 Lights. Hanan Keriat, Hierophant of the Temple of the Triad in Eden, was her consort for over three cycles. Master Emon was one of the beings responsible for the philosophy and training which manifested the 12 crystals of Kobol, born since that time by the members of the Ruling Council. Before the entrance to her cenotaph is carved this tribute—

She lived like the unfolding River Stars  
In the fullness of time, to the tide she yielded.  
Holy be the outpouring and the going forth,  
The gathering and the returning.



By the Translator



## The Hymns of Emon

And You, O Path of Fire  
Leading out from our planet home  
Spilling a roadway across the night  
Where will you guide?  
Where will you send us, your nestlings?

For the Twelve Gatherings draw us like the Codestone.  
Each telling of unviewed tomorrows  
In unbuilt cities far away.

How can the children of Kobol fail to hear your  
beckoning?

Fire in a pool—

Dark is the mass of unfathomed water  
Full with the promise of what may emerge.

Like the night-guarded waves are lives before You  
Lying in stillness to let the stars touch.

O Far-strewn Map

Within our blood sleeps the pattern—

One people, to many

One homeworld hatching its young.

Where will you bring us, O Path of Fire.



## II

**See** the Unfathomed Spirit!  
Clarity Innate congealing all the created.

From the Hidden Mountain 10 streams gush forth  
Proclaiming the rhythm of formation  
10 streams that run beneath the stones  
And through the heavens.

Shatter the waters  
And a thousand drops explode  
Countless droplets shiver the sunlight into rainbows.

Can the wise know this?  
Oh, ye sages and priests,  
Ye leaders and hierophants ~  
Hand over yourselves to the 10 Camps of the Law  
And what is left  
Cast into the skies ~  
See the Unfathomed Mystery!



### III

**Hail** unto Thee, Understanding Radiance!  
Ancient and Great Presence  
Holding the stars in Your lap.  
Out of the Void  
You pour forth the generations of stars  
More abundantly than the milk of 'Ishtar  
You pour them forth for the kindling  
And the nourishment of life.

Certain is Thy touch, O Great One  
It rests with us, as with suns  
From the first engendering when the thread is  
woven.

O! Your summons is our certainty  
The dark arms a solemn gate awaiting all.

Gate of Eternity, Door of Mystery  
Bless us with Thy illumination!  
So may our venturings throughout space  
In all time  
Be a coming-into-knowledge of Thee  
O Presence of Understanding.



#### IV

**F**ar away beyond our numbered worlds  
Are burning galaxies  
All hidden from our sight this age  
Are the coalescing suns' beings still to come—

Welcome! The seeds of tomorrow's suns!  
Welcome! The creation of new dawns!  
Blessed is Wisdom moving the waiting substance  
In gladness unto day.  
Blessed be the new Creating  
From cycle to cycle is the movement known.

Therefore sing! Ye Daughters of Eden  
And Princess of Imhryrr the Lost  
Ye dwellers in the high places  
And under the open sky  
Sing! for this very conton  
Does Wisdom seek to move in you.



Sayings of Emon  
Attributed to Emon Pa-Neteru,  
Third Ruler of Kobol

Empty the words of the sire who says:  
"I will beget worlds!"  
And gives not H/Is entire being  
As the shaft of creation.

❖ ❖ ❖  
In the days of trial,  
three things will remain:  
Change, and the necessity of changing  
The 10 Lights creating  
The 12 crystals of Learning.

❖ ❖ ❖  
The learned look to the past,  
But see it not;  
The true leader sees the future and knows the past  
Because She has learned to perceive

❖ ❖ ❖  
A true leader asks whether a contemplated action  
Is in accord with universal Law.  
Balanced on that pivot,  
The leader knows perfect freedom.







SHEAN & THERA



# cat dancing

story By susan matthews

art By martynn

She tugged nervously at one of the door-veils in her impatience, and half-snarled in irritation as a nail caught in the filmy fabric and rent a six-inch mark of its passage. She stared at the torn netting in dismay and mewled unhappily to herself--*murreff, I hadn't meant to do that...*

Experienced as she was, she still found the bustle and the furiously suppressed commotion of pre-stage areas upsetting. A well-trained, well-paid professional, she always fell prey to a certain amount of nervousness before her turn to perform--not withstanding the fact that she knew herself to be among the better class of temple-dancers, if not among the best. Holding the torn doorveil, she sought to calm herself; she was saying her Quietwords over in her mind when the stagemistress found her.

"What's a got, Therra?" the cattan asked, eyes slanting, curious to see what Thera held. "Eh, hass torn the veil? --nothing, it iss nothing. Iss ready? Time, when cantatrrix out--"

The cattan's dialect was difficult for Thera to comprehend, even though she and the cattan Sheali shared a genetic heritage. Sheali preserved the furred flesh, the retractible claws, the feline muzzle of the most successful predatorial species on Heildi; and, due to the shape of her mouth, she had even more trouble than Thera in dealing with Galactic standard. Thera was much more hominid, and managed her speech so well that only the teasing, seductive sibilants that inflected her words indicated the language was not native.

Part of a respected dancing troupe, she was, on her third tour; being not Heildi cattan, but Althea pantherix, she presented to humanoid audiences an aspect not so much alien as exotic. Little indeed marked her as Althea, save her cat-grace of going, the elegance lent her longfingered hands by her sharp little nails, and the sensual extravagance of her tail, green and gold in soft furred bands and partially prehensile.

Her turn, once the Cantatrix had finished the last song...the applause for the cantatrix died,

the lights changed color and dimmed, the musicians started in to some wailing song of bells and flutes, and Thera went gliding on her little bare feet out into the center of the circlestage to dance.

This was neither the best nor the worst stage on which she'd performed in the course of her travels. But the theater that her troupe might ordinarily have been granted licence to had been annexed by the local civil authority as a temporary military headquarters, and so they had found themselves employed in a place that, even if it were one of the better drinking houses in Rammergau, was still nonetheless a drinking hall.

True, during the month-long Festival of Endyear in Rammergau, troupes of artisans and dancers frequently found themselves performing in equally disreputable surroundings; but as Thera danced, she could not ignore the fact that many of her audience were mindfuddled by intoxicants, and the long years of study and dedication that had gone to make a temple-dancer of her were lost on them.

Thera did not know precisely who this 'Lesser Moff whoever' might be, and she did not really care. She only wished for a more receptive crowd, the more sophisticated audience she might have had, had not this 'Tarkin' decided he needed the theaters.

Still, it was her job. Not only her job, but her duty to the God, to whom she had been vowed by her parents when still a kit. As a temple-dancer she'd received a better education than her parents might otherwise have been able to afford; and, in addition, she had been taught to dance, the dancing which could ensorcel its viewers and beguile them from all their anxieties, the dancing which created in the slimy strong pantherix a figure of the spirit of the God Itself. The dancing took her beyond herself, in an expression of perfect, and perfectly chaste, sensuality that went far past the capabilities of other pantherix; and it was for the service of the God she danced, and for no mortal being.



One, perhaps two more years, and her days as a temple dancer would be over; for the service of the God was neither oppressive nor unreasonable, and a temple dancer was released of all further vows and obligations when she had seen thirty summers. Thus, in yet another way the service of the God was intended to enrich all Althea society, for even the temple dancers--educated and trained at the expense of the God--were left free, at the beginning of their early maturity, to live for themselves, to share their knowledge freely, to mate and to marry.

--Thera danced. Her position was not unusual, many temple dancers traveled. Her personal allowance was more than adequate, regardless of whether or not the troupe that had hired her was contributing to her temple. Thera enjoyed her grueling, fleeting encounters with the whole richness of beings the known galaxy had to offer.

--Thera danced. Some of the patrons were more attentive, perhaps less drunk, than others; she could not not help but display the best of her talents for these, the beings who still had enough of their wits about them to watch her. In particular she noticed one person in the midst of a crowd of boisterous beings: one of the humanoid races, she couldn't tell which, a male, and made the more easily recognizable by the presence of the handsome Wookiee to his left. He seemed to be fascinated by the rhythm of the dance; only a human, but still he liked the dance, he was attending to her, and she accordingly exerted herself to display for him, and for the few others in her audience with equal discretion, the full extent of her skill in temple dancing.

--And Thera danced...

"You running cargo this trip, boy?"

The speaker was Corellian, and in the pride of his years; his dark brown beard growing somewhat grizzled and his temples silvering, the strength of his frame showed as yet no diminution, and his eyes saw no less clearly for the fine network of lines that traced his spacer's life on his strong face.

Arngelt van Eloi was among the more influential beings in his family, and Han really should be paying more attention--or so the solid kick under the table from Chewbacca seemed to say.

"--Huh? What's that, 'Gelt? Sure, sure. What you got? We'll haul it."

Van Eloi shook his head gently. "No, Han. I'm not asking if you're seeking cargo, I'm asking if you're running it. Now remove your attention--if possible--from the temple dancer, and tell me what brings you to Rammergau this time of the season. Thought you were still running with Jabba the Hut, back Tatooine?"

"Ah, no, Uncle," Han replied, chastened somewhat by the indulgent teasing in van Eloi's voice. "No, we paid off that contract this while

ago. We're out with a passenger--but we shouldn't be two days, if you've got a cargo." Something very vaguely along the lines of the paternal relationship existed between the two men, and Han did his very best to remember to be properly respectful.

"Listen to me, boy, and tear your eyes from the kitten. Your family's got a shipment--"

"That's a kitten? She looks a capable age, to me."

--for one Misako Remi," van Eloi continued as if uninterrupted.

"Misako Remi?" Han exclaimed, startled. "That's an Alderaan shipping house, 'Gelt--"

"Almost entirely destroyed when the homeworld went, but not quite," van Eloi assured him. "And we had cargo on account for 'em at the time. So if you can swing past Rijstaten on your way out to wherever--"

Now he had Han's attention fast. Rijstaten--he was going to Rijstaten, that was where he was supposed to touch base with... "Hey, wait a minute," he murmured suspiciously, almost to himself. He knew better than to suppose that 'Gelt would even skirt a secret unless they were safe from Imperial spies. Still--"Who's left of Misako Remi? Who's to sign? They were homebased on Alderaan, and--"

"And the heir of one of the principle stockholders very luckily chanced to be in transit when it happened. Do you follow me, boy? Young woman, good head for business--understand you've met the lady, if Tanta Birgit says right."

Han leaned back in his chair and sighed a sigh half affectionate, half angry. Of course it was the Princess. He should have known. "All right, 'Gelt," he admitted, capitulating. "You got it. The Falcon's down in 2687B; when'd you want to load?"

"Already loading, boy," replied van Eloi cheerfully. "Now, now. Don't go on. The less you know about it the better. Don't argue with your Uncle Arngelt, Han. You know I've got you covered. Sides--it'll give you time to try and chat up that pantherix you've been so taken with."

Han leaned over the table, not really sure if he were angry or not, and shook his finger at van Eloi. "Some one of these days, 'Gelt--"

"I know, kid, I've heard it. Go along with you now--you'll be wanting to ask her for dinner. Good luck to you, too--she's not what you might think." There was perhaps more affection in van Eloi's voice than usual. "Later, son."

"Later, 'Gelt," said Han, and recognizing his dismissal, he stood to leave. Chewbacca had his recreation lined up, Han knew, and he wanted to follow up on that one dancer, but he had his passenger to check on, first.





CAT DANCING



Troupe Benefit, to be held at Vosay itself on the morrow.

Now, Dispen was a young 't, and afflicted at times with a certain failure of foresight. It was also extraordinarily bright, and always curious, and Han had just about had enough of Dispen. All right, he'd agreed to ferry the little param from Rijnstatten to Rammergau and back. He hadn't said one word about helping Dispen do its business. As far as he was concerned, Dispen was welcome to it. Han tried to clarify this important point to the increasingly anxious little param.

"Look, Dispen, he repeated, raising his voice to drown Dispen's excited explanations, "you figure it out. I'm busy. 's no business of mine, anyway. So why don't you--"

"Solohan!" chirruped the param, growing frantic in its enthusiasm. "It is must recording of Lesser Moff evening next--it is having to find means; vital to Cause--"

"Sht-sht!" warned Han suddenly. Dispen's passion was carrying it into dangerous territory, especially in this open environment. "You're a smart young param, Dispen, you'll figure it out. Didn't you say they'd sent some equipment with you? You'll manage. Now clear out, will you?" Han pushed himself upright from the wall behind the Vosay music hall, and sauntered off in the tracks of a lithe young pantherix who had just passed, presumably from the Vosay's backstage area. "I've got ideas of my own, just now."

Dispen glared half angrily at the retreating back of the Corellian as the latter, in lazy pursuit of the pantherix, rounded a corner. Surely this mission was more important than--than--than whatever. It had to find a way, somehow.

The Lesser Moff had invested Rammergau these eight standards past; but the town was far from secure and the Imperials knew it. So far from secure that the Lesser Moff's planned meeting with a ranking member of the Emperor's notorious Security Bureau was to be conducted under cover of a social situation, as if it were a chance meeting.

Alliance forces had discovered this much from a contact in the lower echelons of the Imperial Security Bureau; and further, that the meeting was to take place at the final performance, the

And Dispen had to be in on that meeting-- somehow, somehow. The Alliance expected the entire campaign for the Imperial suppression of the rebellion in this sector to be outlined in that conversation; Dispen had been given a proxter device to transmit and record the vital information. All it had to do was find some way to emplace the device close enough to the head table. Once that was done, the information was theirs. Even if the device's presence were detected, the Alliance contacts remained secure: the transmissions could not be traced to the Alliance cell in Rammergau.

If only it could come up with the way to place the proxter--Dispen jumped, startled, as the whiskered voice of a cattan purred into its ears.

"Thy friend has a mind to my Therra, eh?" Sheali murmured slyly. "Hass another thought coming to him, he doess. Sshe'ss a templedancerr, not a public dancerr, not ffor ssale. No matter. Iss a nice little parram, it iss. Take Sheali to ssupperr, eh?"

Dispen was not sure how it felt about the invitation, but it hadn't quite the nerve to argue with a creature so furred and fanged as Sheali. It sighed in resignation and allowed itself to be guided as the cattan drew it firmly along. Maybe the cattan would be able to provide the help the Corellian had declined to...

"Excuses," muttered the hostess without conviction, "there is so little room, gentlecreature. Shall this one share your table?"

Thera looked up from her drink, a little startled. The hostess was waiting politely for her answer. A tall young human, looking a little embarrassed at the imposi-

tion, stood behind the hostess. Thera thought she recognized the human from the dancehall; she smiled at him and was rewarded by an engagingly brilliant grin in return. The hostess seemed to take this for a positive answer, and took herself off to an inaccessible corner of the dining room before Thera could protest.

Thera noted the hostess's retreating back with a little dismay as the human drew nearer the



DISPEN THE PARAM  
WITH THE PROXTER



the table, obviously waiting for an invitation to sit down. It was true that there seemed to be no other place to seat this one but at her table. Still, it seemed rather irregular--and Thera wondered suddenly if some other excuse would have been found had the restaurant been half-deserted. Surely that had been the gleam of a handful of gold credits she had seen the young human male hand the hostess? Too many credits, surely, just for finding him a seat, any seat--but perhaps not too many for leading him to *this* seat?

Thera bit her lips with her sharp little teeth, wondering what to--besides, accustomed as she had become to humans, they *would* remind her of the simian she'd had for a pet in her kittenhood.

Ah, well. There was no sense being rude to the young man. She did not *know* if he had bribed the hostess, and he seemed civilized enough: well-groomed, neatly if informally dressed, with a clean scent, warm and slightly musky, which spoke to Thera's delicate senses of his good health.

"Oh, please sit down," she urged, ashamed of herself for having kept him waiting awkwardly for so long. "Share my table. and--tell me your name."

Now that company had found her by--accident, she was not displeased. She *had* been a little lonesome, she supposed. Surely there was no harm in this young human. They could talk about the dance...

"Well, little lady, I hope you'll let me buy your dinner--" Han began, but at the look of sudden affront, of nervous apprehension on her face, he changed his tone and explained himself more carefully. "By way of apology for the intrusion. Please." He'd gained his point, he knew, by the way the vague trouble cleared from between her eyebrows. And at the same time, he'd begun to realize the meaning behind 'Gelt's parting words. This pantherix--she was quick to correct him, albeit gently, when he referred to her as a catten--was not the sort of dancer to which Han was accustomed. Those laughter-loving daughters of dance were frequently in the habit of supplementing their income by a more private, and still more ancient, kind of dancing.

It was now obvious that Thera was not one of these. He was not going to be able to offer her terms and take her to bed in the course of an evening, as he'd meant to do when he'd followed her; and, since he was due to lift the very next evening, buying her dinner was not going to get him anywhere. If he intended to find himself some sport tonight, he had better pay for her supper and excuse himself to visit one of the local Houses. But Han stayed sat.

After all, where was it written that Han Solo was so much the slave of his appetites that he had to find recreation *every* night? His rep-

utation was secure enough; he was long past having to prove his masculinity; and what with all these Imperial troops in Rammergau, the prices for *everything* had gone up.

Besides, he was enjoying this dancer's company. Shy, it seemed, but when she relaxed a bit she *did* have good conversation, and her accent tickled his ear agreeably. The additional expressions lent her face by those pale green catface shadings at the corners of her eyes and under her cheekbones fascinated him. She had a tail, too, which was now demurely wrapped around one arm of her chair to preclude its being trampled; Han felt it might be a little rude of him to pay too much attention to that, interesting as it was.

He was secure in his finances just now, and could easily afford to treat himself and this little lady to a pleasant and enjoyable evening, without the urgent irritation of the usual tumble at the end of it. It was nice. She wasn't--*expecting* him to make a move for her, and she wasn't making the teasing kind of love to him, over dinner, that another woman might have. There were no demands. She didn't expect him to carry her off and ravish her. Much as he enjoyed his sport, he found himself oddly grateful to her for this vacation. It was nice to feel so comfortable with a woman; of course, he *did* rather hope he could kiss her good-night...

She closed the door of her hotel room softly and leaned against it, weak; she heard his feet moving unhurried down the hall after a few seconds hesitation. She could almost see him go, his back slightly bent and his shoulders less than squared, with his fingers tucked into his belt. She sighed, and then she swore. Very mildly, of course, but--oh, the frustration, the reluctant frustration. Her flesh was alive with the memory of his embrace, her mouth still sweet with his kiss; but he had embraced her in courtesy, in polite and gentle passion, and he had not asked to come in. He might have--would have come in, if she'd asked; surely he would never have disappointed a lady. But she could not ask. She *could* not, it was impossible.

She leaned against the door for long minutes after his footfall had faded from her hearing, indulging herself in recalling his good-night. He was a human male, a Corellian, and she had not been able to help being just a little timid with him. She was more than a little competent herself, in terms of physical strength, and knew herself to be more evenly matched with him than many humanoid women might have been; still she had known that tiny tremor of fear when he enclosed her in his arms at the awareness of his strength so close to her. He had not made the smallest threat out of his strength, however, and she quite forgot his strangeness, his uncatness, as he kissed her. Tens of little kisses, such sweet caresses of her mouth with his, as if he found her lips sweet liquor, and her tongue--

Thera blushed deeply, her embarrassment flooding the previous rosininess from her cheeks,



drowning the rosebloom of her face in deeper crimson. It was brazen of her, she would never forgive herself for it--to have forgotten herself so far as to--to capture him to her, to wrap and imprison his thigh with her shameless, wanton tail--of, if anyone had seen it, she would die...

She could not have refused him, if he'd wanted to come in. Perhaps it was just as well he hadn't asked.

Thera sighed and swore, and sighed again. There now, she'd best get herself to bed, she had to dance a command performance tomorrow; she must be rested when--

"Therra," the voice, urgent, coupled with the impatient scratching at her door to wake her from the uneasy sleep she'd finally found. Thera rolled, half-conscious, onto her back, still clutching her pillow. "Mrrowf? What--"

"Thera," came the confirmation, as Sheali slipped into the unlocked room. "Time to be up, pet, we have much work tonight. A gift has come for you, Therra."

A gift? Well, that wasn't unusual; she was, after all, a dancer, and a frequent recipient of trinkets and flowers--which usually amounted to bribes of various sorts. Thera reached for the little box lazily, opening it as Sheali turned to go. What she found brought her bolt upright in the bed, calling after Sheali in sudden speculation.

"What message, Ssheali?"

"No message, Thera...from an admirrrr iss all," and Sheali was out the door, all her whiskers bristling with pleasure.

Sitting in the bed, the room quiet behind Sheali's going, Thera examined the little bauble in its nest of silkwool. It was a gem for a temple dancer's pectoral, she was certain. The oddest sort she'd seen, true, neither cut nor faceted, and rather dull for a pectoral gem, really, and heavier than...

Who could have sent it? One of her-- could it have been the young Corellian, Han?

Thera made her decision on an impulse. It was an odd gem for a pectoral, true, and really not very attractive; but it *might* have come from Han. And, dull as it was, no-one would notice it among the brighter jewels in her pectoral. She would wear it. Whoever had sent it could mark--if he cared to--where she would set it, central in the string of gems. Yes, she would place it in her pectoral. She would pretend it came from Han.

Early evening and Han, who had not gotten his beauty sleep after all, was not in the most patient of moods. Chewbacca had been late in, but Han was accustomed to that. However, Dispen was

closer and closer to an untimely termination of its little life as Han tripped over it for what seemed to be the fifteenth time that standard.

"Gerrampt klipt!" Han snarled, secure in the knowledge that Dispen would be unable to translate the obscure obscenity. "Dispen, what have you got to be so--pardon the expression--cocky about?" He tore himself away from his preflight checks to favor the param with a killing glare.

Dispen could not be subdued by Solo's displeasure. "Have done work my, Solohan," Dispen confided. "Proxter in properly place set has been. Information received being is."

"Fine, fine," Han muttered--but he was intrigued in spite of himself. "A proxter device, huh? How'd you do it, then? I'd'a figured they'd scan pretty good, before the show started. How'd you get a proxter past 'em?"

"Not emplaced until started show is have," explained Dispen with obvious pride.

"And?" Now Han was intrigued. Dispen paused, plainly considering whether or not to hold back a little and enjoy Solo's attention. But its basic enthusiasm burst through almost immediately.

"Thirty-five meter proxter is, Solohan--pick up from backstage will. Wearing the proxter the dancer is. Perfect."

Han nodded thoughtfully. What he could sort out from the param's convoluted syntax made sense. Yes, a three-five proxter would do it; the receptor unit could isolate the desired conversations and lock onto them easily. But--

"What did you say about a dancer?"

"It the proxter to Theradancer sent," Dispen said with triumph in its voice. "Sheali-catten it like a dancer-pectoralgem looked said. Theradancer a pectoralgem lost had just. Therefore to Theradancer proxter for pectoral sent. Clever and efficient, it not is?"

Han opened his mouth to approve. It was a very good--wait. Wearing a proxter? "What did Thera say about--how is she going to get away?"

"Get away? What Solo meaning is?"

"Dispen. Dispen, if she's wearing a proxter, they'll trace it--"

"Traced to rebels cannot be," replied Dispen, clearly puzzled. "Thera to even know did not--"

"CHEWIE!!" Han yelled, and the Wookiee flew out of the shadows underneath the *Falcon's* belly in full attack readiness. When he saw that Han was only facing the param, he stopped in mid-launch.

\*Han? What's--\*

"Chewie, you gotta help me, stop me before I kill this-- How close're we to preflight?"



Chewbacca grunted and relaxed his guard.  
\*How close do you want to be?\*

Han grasped a handful of Chewbacca's shoulder pelt and pounded him urgently. "I gotta get down to the Vosay an' back--and we gotta split as soon as. Can do?"

Chewbacca didn't bother to answer. Han was already out of the docking bay and sprinting for the corner as if twelve jealous women were after him.

The param stared after the fleeing Corellian, then turned its miserable face up to meet the gaze of the curious Wookiee. Chewie felt sorry for it. \*What was that all about?\* he asked.

"Proxter device about is...but why? Can't not traced be--"

\*Not traced to its receptor, no,\* Chewbacca agreed, \*but the proxter itself of course can be easily located--\* Chewbacca's explanation was interrupted by the sudden requirement of caring for the param, which seemed taken in some sort of fit.

Well, he'd shipped with Han for longer than he really cared to remember. He was accustomed to odd behavior by now, from anyone or anything.

The troopers doing monitor in the back alley of the Vosay had caught the transmission during the early portions of the programme. Local security hadn't seen the need to report it to the unpopular Imperial Security Bureau types, seeing as those were arrogant bastards, even for Imperials. The selfscramble of the transmission identified it well enough as a proxterpulse. It wouldn't take long to track it down and find the rebel device. That ought to shut the ISB up. Local security was a little concerned about the information being lost while they did their tracking, but once they had the transmitter, they'd find the rebel establishment.

That was one of the few things the ISB was good for.

Thera thought she had seldom danced so well, but the officials at the front table were paying no attention at all to her, try as she would to catch their interest. She heard--no, sensed--the disturbance in the back of the dance hall, and tuned it out, concentrating on the patterns of the dance.

The disturbance, whatever its cause, was not to be easily controlled. Thera was vaguely aware of its spread throughout the hall, from back

to front. Her front-table guests were fidgeting nervously, and the security they'd brought were fingering their weapons and looking around the hall apprehensively.

It all happened too quickly to grasp. There was the hysterical voice, the frantic human running through the crowd--"Rebels! They've hit the perimeter! Get the civilians undercover!"--and somersaulting to the stage area, using the front table for his springboard. He caught Thera around the waist in mid-turn and was out the back with her under his arm, screaming to the startled troopers as he dashed past, "Rebels! Run for your lives!"

One of Han's compatriots idly turned to another of the Corellians at the first table.

"When's that boy going to grow up, 'Gelt?"

Arrgelt van Eloi shrugged and casually upset a nearby table across the path of the squad of troopers fighting their way after the lone berserker.

"No idea, Villem. May not live long enough. Whose turn for a pitcher? Your deal."

They'd barely passed out of earshot of the commotion at the Vosay when Thera struggled free.

"Wait! Where're we going? Where're the rebels? What're you--" Then she recognized Han and stopped. He seized the opportunity.

"We're the rebels, lady, sort of. Come on, we gotta get you out of here. They'll be after us--"

"What do you mean, rebels? Me? You've losst yourr *ssensessss*. I'm not--"

Han thought he heard a squad at chasétrot closing in on them, and abandoned any further explanation till later. "Aw, hell, Thera, he complained apologetically. He slung her sideways across his back and ran with her kicking and screaming and lashing with her tail. He reached the docking bay where the *Millennium Falcon* was berthed. He didn't think they'd be tracked to the bay, but the proxter Thera was wearing was still activated. He didn't have time to search for the damned thing, so he did what was next best: he dumped Thera unceremoniously in the *Falcon's* passenger hold and shouted forward, "Chewie, lift! LIFT!!"

"Kidnap," Thera insisted. "You have *satolen* me. I demand to be rre--"

Han sighed. They were safe in hyper, and



the course into Rijnstatten presented no danger to his wary Corellian watchfulness. The *Falcon* had been cleared to lift, and neither the timing of her departure nor her destination was likely to arouse any Imperial suspicion. Han knew, as did any spacer, the rivalries that existed between local and Imperial police forces, and he knew that the 'powers-that-be' in Rammergau were likely to expend all their energies in mutual recriminations, not in checking on any possible anomalies in space departures.

His contacts in Rijnstatten with the Princess and her Alliance operation had been set up so casually as to avoid all possible suspicion. And of course, the ports of Rijnstatten could not afford to be suspicious; the innocent exuberance of criminal activity in Rijnstatten's ports created enough 'static' to hide *three* Rebel Alliances from the attention of the pitifully outclassed and overworked Imperial police forces in the sector. So he was perfectly secure in his destination, too.

Dispen *had* accomplished its mission, though how much information had been revealed to the Alliance net before Han had interrupted the performance was unknown. It was the *manner* in which Dispen had accomplished that mission--

Han had been trying to explain things to Thera for over an hour now, and he was not making any headway. Dispen was no help. The little param, horribly embarrassed at its potentially disastrous oversight, evidently expected Han to flatten it for its stupidity and was hiding.

Thera wouldn't let Han near her. She was curled up on one of the roundseats in the main hold area, her legs drawn up to her chest and her arms wrapped protectively around her shins. She glared at him suspiciously over the tops of her knees, and once she'd actually hissed at him. He really couldn't blame her. He would have felt the same way. He hadn't meant to manhandle her, of course, but he'd been in a hurry...

"Thera, I *can't* return you, you've just got to believe me. There's gonna be an investigation on in Rammergau, and with that proaxter you're wearing, they're gonna be *looking* for you, Thera--"

"So let them *find* me. Correllian-- Correllian thief! I have nothing to hide, I had no knowledge--"

"Thera!" Han knew it was her fury speaking. He had saved her from what would have been a very unpleasant--perhaps *terminally* unpleasant--situation, and he himself was as innocent of creating this mess as Dispen was thoughtless. "Thera, they wouldn't believe you, you know that. And by the time they *did* believe you, it'd be too late for you. Thera, will you please *listen* to me?"

She muttered unhappily in her throat, her anger fading into anxiety. He had told her about the whole situation, and she *did* believe him,

but how could she accept, how could she understand, why all this should happen to her? It had been an impulse that had led her to wear the proaxter to begin with. She tugged angrily at her pectoral chain, meaning to remove the offending bead forthwith; the chain broke in her impatient hand. She dangled it in her long, slim fingers, watching the proaxter as it hung slowly revolving in the air. She hissed at it and flung it into a far corner.

Immediately, she was ashamed of herself. It was childish, to be hissing at a bead. She tucked herself into a tighter roll, wrapping her tail around her ankles for greater security. Her expression when she looked at Han again was somewhat more encouraging, and he ventured to sit down facing her.

"Look, I've said I'm sorry. You don't *know* how sorry I am. It shouldn't have happened. But ya gotta understand, I couldn't have just left you there, could I?"

"They will find out it wass me, wearing--"

"They'll guess, anyway."

"And they will look--all of my possessions, in my rroom, they will know who to look forr--"

"They won't find you, Thera. I know some people who'll hide you, don't worry."

"I am dsshonored," she said in despair. "The sshame on my ffamily, the brroken contract--"

She'd been harping on that string on and off, and Han had only halfway listened to her. Now he seemed to hear the words for the first time. "Can't you buy out of this contract? There's no shame in that, I've done it myself."

"With what?" Thera wailed miserably. Then she collected herself and continued more calmly. "I have no money here, and they will seize what I lefft, will they not? I am a templedancerr. But if they are looking ffor a templedancerr, how can I dance? And who will employ a dancerr who dsshonored the sservice of the God by breaking contract? And--no, it is impossible--"

"Y'know," Han interrupted abruptly, "all this talk about honor reminds me. I got an idea."

If Thera had been less polite, she might have snorted her delicate derision. As it was, she carefully refrained from making any comment.

"It was the Alliance did this to you, after all. Dispen--the Alliance, right? That means the Alliance owes you, right? A debt of honor. How much is it you need?"

"Fifteen thousand for each year--thirty thousand," Thera replied, disconsolate. But Han did not seem to find the figure excessive.

"The Princess'll squawk, always does. But she'll make good on it, Thera. A debt of honor... Yeah, Leia Organa's real big on honor. We'll make it work. C'mon, Thera--tell me you'll



let me live?"

Her outrage at his mishandling of her, her misery at the sudden chain of events that had complicated her once orderly life so unkindly, had all but erased her memory of his kiss. Now, accepting what she could not escape from, she found herself diverted by his sincerity, his concern for her. This last line, delivered in a half-serious, pleading tone, his face a perfect type of cajolery, mollified her to such an extent that she smiled shyly at him and uncurled her tail to sit straight in the roundseat with that interesting appendage laid calmly across her lap.

"Well, it's a start, at least," Han observed aloud. "Uh, Thera, you'll be a little conspicuous on Rijnstaten, dressed like that. Do you want me to find you some clothes?"

Rijnstaten. There was no help for it, she was going to Rijnstaten. Thera stood up wordlessly and nodded. She padded quietly after Han as he entered some more private portion of the ship.

The room she followed him to had last been used as a berth of some sort. It didn't feel lived in, not as though it were Han's own berth, but the long low bed that was made up in a niche between two bulkhead arches seemed roomy enough for two, and clean. Han found something in the storage area under the bed; he lifted a neat pile of folded silks from the storage box and, straightening, turned to the door.

"I think these might suit you," he said, offering her his armload of draperies. "I've seen catten wearing these, anyway. Have you ever worn one of these things?"

Thera took the clothing from him and put the pile down on a table set into the bulkhead. Yes. She'd seen these before: a two-piece garment, choli and wrapped skirt.

She didn't know what had gotten into her, really she didn't. At any other time she'd have died before making such a brazen suggestion. But there was her experience from the previous evening to urge her on.

She wanted him--she could not deny it to herself--even if she remained a little frightened of him. And if he would not--had not made the first move out of deference to her character, she would have to do so, if she were ever to find out...

He had made no outward advance toward her, but she could not help responding to him, and to his concern for her, his courtesy, as much as to his person. Thera felt quite suddenly as if all things might be excused her, just this once; her entire world had just gone up in smoke, and she could be forgiven all sorts of outrageous conduct in light of the shock she had sustained.

She turned her back to him, not quite able for all her resolution to face him boldly.

"You will help me with my skirt?"

She took Han a little by surprise; he had been concentrating so on suppressing his own suggestions, that he did not know how to take hers. He made her no answer, but to move to her. He circled her waist hesitantly with his strong brown hands, searching for the catch. He stood away from her back, not wanting to pressure her by standing too close. But in a moment, he felt a unique caress across the small of his back, sinuous and sensual as her elegant green-and-gold tail snaked around to embrace him.

He bent his head over her shoulder to catch her eye and noted that her cheeks were bright with astonishment at her own boldness. Her eyes when she looked at him were greengold and luminous, great cat-eyes that fascinated him almost as much as her tail. He watched her carefully for any sign of withdrawal, of reluctance, as he fit himself against the supple line of her fine, well-muscled dancer's back and slid one hand down to her thigh, his other flattening over her belly.

"Thera," he muttered, a little hoarsely perhaps, "Thera--" and he kissed her neck passionately from behind, just below the soft infolding of one delicately pointed ear. She trembled a little, and Han held her more closely, still careful not to use his strength to constrain her.

"Thera, kitten, I owe you--lemme make it up to you, little lady, all right?"

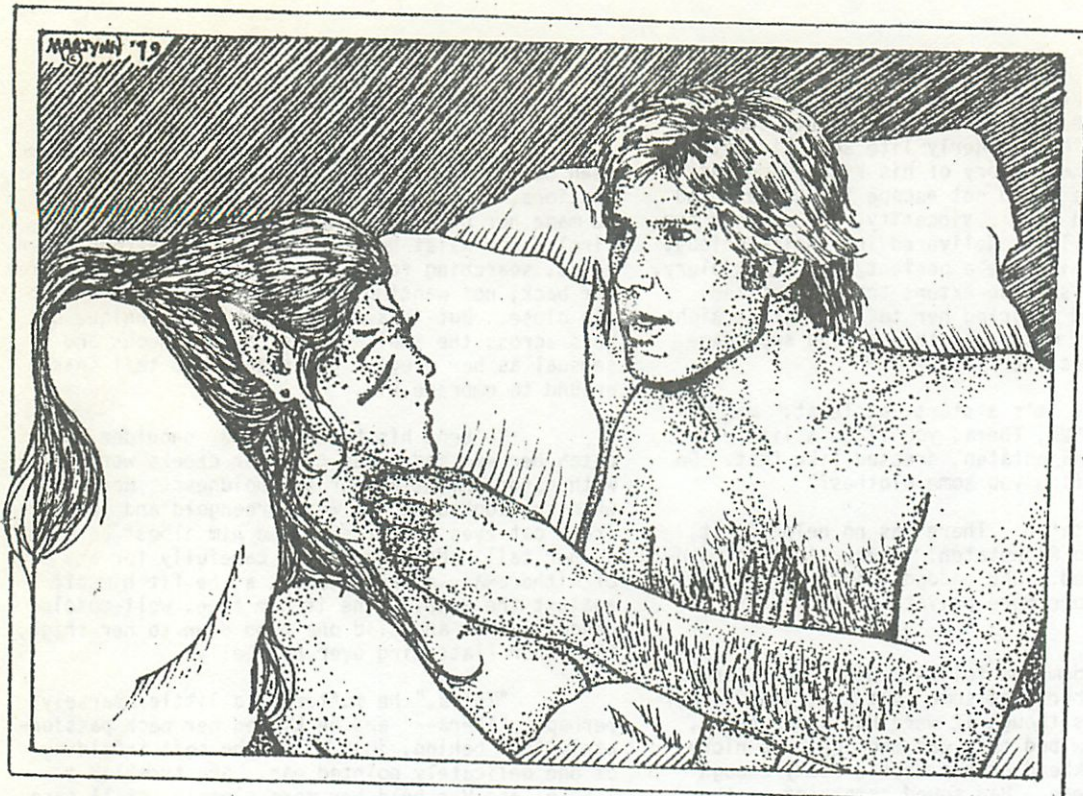
She trembled again as he kissed the back of her neck, his mouth hot just at the hairline. She turned in his arms slowly, without speaking, and sat on the bed. He started to reach for her, but she forestalled him. She had taken this irreversible step, she decided, and all boldness was permitted to her. So she stopped his hands from seeking her waist and let a longfingered hand stroke ever so lightly up each of his arms to his shoulders to pull him down to her to be kissed.

His mouth and her mouth. He sat down beside her, cupping her face in both hands, and they lay back together as their passion began to deepen. Such kisses he had: such sweet small touchings of her mouth, such a teasing of her lips to open with his tongue, demanding, insisting, but never overpowering. Thera had always thought a drunkenness of kisses to be a figure of speech, until now. But Han was determined, and passionate, and over and always loving, so that, not fearing his misuse of his strength, she felt safe in surrender to his caress...

Then quite suddenly she opened her eyes and pushed him from her. He half rolled, half fell on his back across the bed. Thera shifted her weight to pin his long legs down, and began to play with his shirt.

It was not that Thera was inexperienced, but that she was shy, reticent. She had never





## HAN & THERA 1

shared the delights of love with a human before. Now that she had made her mind up to forget her basic reticence with this Han Solo her native curiosity began to surface. He was broader of build, heavier of bone, than a male of her own species, and she was going to have to check out certain intriguing--rumors. But first things first.

The shirt that he was wearing fastened down the front, and Thera played at solstice-gifts with the fastenings, undoing them one by one, exclaiming softly to herself as she explored each new bit of territory.

Thera knew she really should be at least a little ashamed of herself--but she wasn't. She thought his shoulders were wonderful, and the soft hairs of his chest intriguing; she enjoyed his small pleased sounds as she stroked down across his breast with her long nails, and the way his belly seemed to tighten beneath the stroke of her palm was fascinating, delightful. Surely it was unreasonable to stop where she was, they were both having so much fun--she slid her little fingers naughtily beneath the waistband of his trousers, and made a curious growling sound of passionate pleasure to see him respond to the touch of her nails across the taut flesh of that sweet hollow place just to one side of the hipbone. Oh yes, surely she could be excused some further exploration.

"Take these things off," she said.

Han had to let his head clear before he

understood what she referred to. Once he had realized what she was about, he had lain still, content to have her pleasure in him; he knew how much he enjoyed undressing his ladies, and it had seemed only fair to him that Thera should sample the same pleasure. Besides, it had given him plenty of time to appreciate the sweet full curves of the body stretched against him, and he had savored once again the multiplicity of expressions her face displayed.

But now, what--the boots, she didn't care for the boots. They were really all that he still wore, when one came right down to it. He sat up slowly, his senses troubled with her voluptuous teasing, and pulled off his boots, kicking his trousers away from his ankles, pulling the crumpled shirt from underneath him to fling it against the far wall.

He stood to face Thera as she lay on the bed, and his hands found her waist and stroked her long legs. She'd danced barefoot, and her little feet were naked; Han admired the strong arches, the slender ankles, with his fingers.

Then there were her skirts to contend with--a game of skirt-catching between them, Han battling with her fascinating tail for the right to pet her dancer's thighs, her sweet full hips... Han won, cheating, pinning Thera's tail gently but firmly under one knee as he considered her.

This halter was definitely on his list of things to discard, he decided. She'd already broken the pectoral chain that helped to secure the halter in her impatience with the offending proter; now there could surely be only one more





HAN THERA 5



closure to get around, and he could--Han leaned over her as she lay, and let his mouth test the soft roundness of the exposed heartside of her breast as his light touch explored the fullness that remained discreetly covered.

She sighed her pleasure in his teasing, and he let his hand stray subtly behind her back while he nuzzled playfully at the ripe swelling of the undersides of her soft breasts. She was marked between them, a triangular shading down her breastbone that mimicked the markings of her face in their color. And, although her flesh, from what he could tell, was not furred, still she seemed to carry somehow the warm sweet perfume of a cat's clean fragrance.

Han had to remind himself to slow down, to take his time. He was not quite sure of Thera yet, and it was important to him that she should find as much pleasure in him as he in her.

There. He had found the fastenings of her halter. He stripped her of her covering gently and kissed her mouth before he fell to studying her naked breast more properly.

He was still leaning over her, so as not to trouble her with his weight, and his arms met at the middle of her back to lift her toward him as he teased her gently with his mouth. Such a pleasant garden to play in...

She stretched beneath the touch of his mouth for a long moment, but then she seemed taken in a sudden fit of shyness, and she curled away from him with a soft cry of distress. Han was unsure of his next move. He didn't want to box her in, to maneuver her into doing something she'd rather not; but he couldn't tell if her withdrawal was meant to guard him away from her or not. Surely it would be discourteous of him not to comfort her distress.

So considering, Han lay down with her on the bed again, embracing her from behind to cuddle her gently. Covers. Maybe she wanted covers--Han could understand a shyness of being naked, he felt the same way himself sometimes. He drew the warmers over them both, tucked the soft coverlet reassuringly around her, and fell to kissing her again, waiting to see if the shyness would pass.

She stirred against him, and her little cat-noises of pleasure encouraged his nibbling at her. She rolled back against him, facing him, and Han leaned back on one elbow to give her room while she sported with him.

Oh, yes. This was great fun--her eyes when they met his were brilliant with a certain wicked playfulness. She put up her mouth to be kissed, and Han slid one hand beneath her neck to support her head as he kissed her: properly, and at great length, and with the most delightful sort of lustful enthusiasm. Thera seemed to give herself up to that delicious sensation, to be beguiled by his mouth and his attempts on her dancer's skirt.

Han started suddenly, and raised himself slightly, twisting slowly to look over his shoulder. There was something odd, something wonderfully

unbalanced, about her caressing of his back--what? There were her two hands, the fingers of one mapping out that old scar down his shoulderblade; and the other caress he'd felt along his thighs, across the small of his back--her tail. He stared at Thera with pleased surprise, and she waved her tail feebly at him, a little shy again. But then she tucked that fascinating appendage slyly between his knees and tickled him, and Han, his sense of fun tickled as well, smiled and captured her mouth again.

Testing, delicately probing, he stroked her throat and shoulders, letting his mouth wander to nurse at her earlobe; she did not discourage him, but giggled in his ear as he acquainted himself more fully with her flesh.

The proof of his passionate interest was evident now, but she did not seem offended at his presumptuous forwardness. She slapped her tail impatiently across his buttocks, inviting him to shift his weight; she wriggled in delight beneath him at his pleasuring with her breasts.

This wriggle caught Han's attention, reminded him of her skirts; she contested briefly with him for possession of her dancer's costume before his mouth teased her into surrender. She lay quietly then, seeming content to be undressed, and rolled her hips for him to take the silken panels down from her waist and thighs; her undergarments fell victim to the same campaign, and she lay naked for him as he caressed her.

Flank to flank they lay them down together, sharing their pleasures generously. Amorous teasing was not yet submerged in passion, and they played together for a while. Han insisted on being allowed to inspect her fifth appendage; Thera teased him by dancing the subtle tip of her tail about his person, eluding capture.

He threatened to bob her ears, and she relented. And as he played with her tail, she sat half-straddling his lap to run her fingers along his ears, seeming to take pleasure in what must have been, for her, exotic and alien.

She nibbled the tops of them, intrigued, no doubt, by the unpointed curve so unlike her own elegant cat-ears, and he retaliated by tasting all of her sweet cat-markings, face and breast, belly and thigh.

It was wonderful, it was great fun--for a while. Still, after a time, their play became more earnest, and all time for teasing was done...

Han shook himself awake with a little start. What? How long had he--there it was, the sound that had woken him, Chewbacca calling at him from the other side of the closed door.

\*I'd be dressing just about now, Han--that is, unless I wanted to hit sublight bare-ass naked.\*

They were coming into Rijnstaten and it



was time to jump from hyper back into normal space. Too bad. He didn't feel like getting up just yet.

Thera lay sweet against his left side, her head pillowed on his shoulder, her arm stretched out across his chest comfortably. Han lay quiet and enjoyed the pleasant sleepy sensation of her presence. She was a lovely lady, shy, but--Han studied her sleeping face and searched for the word. "Honest" was as close as he could come.

An honest woman, for all her reticence, and not the teasing flirt some others had been who had used a pretense of shyness to conceal a less than admirable appetite.

Han settled his shoulders more deeply into the pillows and lost himself to a dozing daydream. He would move her into his berth, and she'd stay with the *Falcon* as it travelled; she could dance, so she wouldn't feel useless, and Chewie--

Chewie was likely to override the security system at the door and drag his lazy captain out of bed, dressed or not.

Han sighed, and kissed Thera between her sleeping eyes. Best to get up, and--

Thera woke, a little surprised at where she found herself. She stretched, and smiled up at him. She offered her mouth, her dainty pointed eyeteeth shadowy behind her parted lips, and he kissed her...no, he really *did* have to get up, and if he did not leave her bed soon he wasn't going to make it.

She resigned herself to it with a gentle reluctance, and lay on her back to watch him dress. He was very nice to look at, the strong lean lines of him--

The Wooiee passed by outside and threw some comment at the door that Thera did not quite catch. Han paused and listened. He belted his trousers and came to lean over her where she lay in the bed.

"Thera," he said, and she touched his warm breast caressingly, "we're only two hours out of Rijnstaten. I've got to get up on my comps. You'll want to dress. You've got what you need here? Come on out when you're ready for your breakfast, eh, kitten?"





Insofar as rebel operations in the Rijn-staten port of Gerent were centralized at all, they were centralized at the Leaguer warehouse complex in the docking bay area. It was there that Andrej Balkney--christened 'Drusha since his defection from Imperial service--found Han Solo, and fell into step with an unusually subdued Corellian.

"Seen your dancer off, Solo?"

"Hunh? Oh, hey, 'Drusha. Listen, *next* time you lend one of your little toys out, make sure your people know how they work, first, will you? Poor old Dispen, it's just humiliated."

"Yeah, well, I guess I could have, but I thought Dispen knew all about proxters."

"Just because you've been breathing spyeyes since you were--"

"And that one was special, too," Balkney continued, calmly ignoring Han's jibes. "I was glad to get it back, I can tell you. That and the rekchip."

"The what?" Han's narrowed gaze said quite clearly that he didn't trust the Arakcheav any further than he could throw him. Granted, he was bigger than the ex-Manhunter, but--

"Rekchip, Han. The one in the proxter. That was one of my *ncier* little devices. It was programmed to transmit for slightly more than half a standard, but it will record for up to five standards after that."

"Record...five standard days...d'you mean--"

"And with a range of thirty-five, too," Balkney added innocently. "They've got it up on the *Castleton* right now--fairly secure place for analysis. Of course, they aren't likely to find anything *interesting*, but they *do* insist on--what's gotten into *you*?"

But Solo was not listening. Han was well on the way out of the warehouse complex, his jogtrot as fast a pace as he could manage while dodging the other beings on the thoroughfare. He was heading, Balkney knew, for the docking bay where the cruiser *Castleton* was berthed.

"*That*," accused a female voice just behind him, "was *terrible*."

Balkney slowed for his friend Thom, and circled his arm around her waist as they walked on. "Oh, I don't know. I thought it was pretty good, myself. Remember, I'm a jealous bastard, Thom."

"A bastard, anyway." But she made no move to escape his arm. "Was all of that true, about the proxter device?"

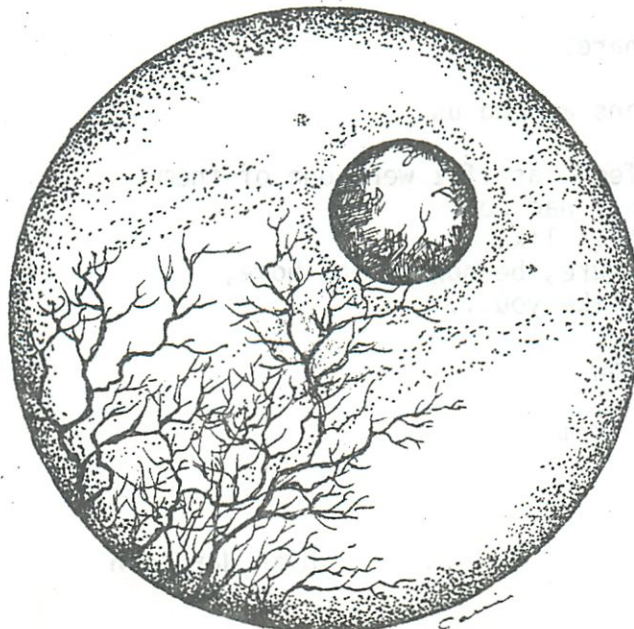
"Oh, yes--all true. But, ah, not all the truth."

"'Drusha..."

"The rekchip can only register directionally, got a forty-five arc on't. We've been through the analysis already, and we have it on record, now, that Dispen beat the the Wookiee three times at holochess before they dropped out of hyper."

"Walk down to the river with me? Have an apple, Thom."

THE END





# To a Fellow Alien

## Mark Harris Speaks To Spock

Your image came again last night  
At dusk, when work ends and patterns change  
And things begin to run together  
(Too long on land).  
Now I am no longer sure  
What was real  
And what simply dream.

What bonds do we share?  
Neither form nor world, and yet--  
Your face masked, mine open,  
The expressions match.  
And in your eyes I see  
What those around me do not.

Difference.

Almost, our worlds touch...  
But the barrier stays between us  
(Strange screen, whose images register  
on no other senses).  
I reach out--

Nothing. Fantasies again.

What bonds do we share?  
Not memories.  
Only the alien humans around us.

They taught me to feel, as if I were one of them.  
Sometimes I wish they had not.  
I too, know what it is like  
To belong to no culture, be nowhere at home,  
And have no others like you...

But at least you know  
Who you are  
And where you come from

If not why.



Dian Hardison



# STREET PUNK

Written & Illustrated by  
Winston Howlett

*"You don't know me, but I'm your brother. I was raised here in this living hell."*

*"TAKING IT TO THE STREETS"*  
(Micheal MacDonald)

A love affair is like a burning candle in the dark: the glow attracts a huge swarm of spectators, all fluttering close by, trying to catch some of the warmth. This is especially true during social occasions, like surprise birthday parties.

This celebration was for Frank Callahan in his making the 'crossover' to thirty, but Tai Busher--his best friend--gave the best present to Uhura, to show his appreciation for her help in getting the whole thing organized. There were only two other Africans in the room at the time, but when Tai gave her the star-jewel pendant, there was no one who thought what she had said to him in Swahili was a mere "Thank you", particularly with the long kiss that followed. That kiss evoked a few "ahhhs" and a couple of comments, one of which was, "They act like childhood sweethearts!"

"Sweethearts, yes," Tai replied to that one, "childhood, no." And then he jumped out of the way of the females swarming around Uhura for a closer look at the pendant.

"You and she never met before joining the Enterprise, did you?" Frank asked him as they and several others descended on the punch bowl.

"Africa is a very large continent, buddy," Tai said, dropping a Saurian brandy ice cube in his own cup. "I was born and raised in Johannesburg, Pretoria. Back before the Eugenics Wars, when the states were countries, Pretoria was known as South Africa--"

Frank downed his drink in one gulp. "You've told me all that before. What I want to know is, how far away from Uhura's home were you?"

"About fifteen hundred kilometers."

"Woof! No way you two could have known each other, or even met!"

"No way, Frank. No possible way."

\*



"Uhura, how do you say 'jewel' in Swahili?" Natalie Arkin asked.

"Johari," Uhura answered.

Christine Chapel snapped her fingers. "'Johari'! But that's--"

The Bantu woman laughed. "Yes, the name of my hometown."

"Did Tai grow up in Johari, too?" Natalie asked hopefully.

"Oh, so you're the one who made that remark about childhood sweethearts! No, I'm afraid you're way off course. Tai grew up in Johannesburg, a very large city in southern Africa. Johari is a coastal town in Kenya, in the northeast. The distance between the two is so large that I remember taking a long nap during the air flight--"

Natalie's eyes lit up. "Oh, so you *did* visit Johannesburg!"

"Yes. Once. I was twelve at the time. My parents and I flew there to visit my father's brother and his family. We hadn't seen them in about six years, since they'd moved down there.."

\*

Sulu asked, "What was it like in Johannesburg, Tai?"

The engineer shrugged. "One Terran metropolis is much like another. I grew up in the northern section, a slum area called the 'Furnace'. I was a street punk, running with one gang or another since the age of seven."

"A lot of gang wars?" Frank wondered.

"We *lived* for 'em! We called them 'mixers'. Saw a lot of my friends get 'ground up' in them. I especially remember a really big one, when I was fourteen..."

\*

Uhura frowned slightly. "It was the funniest--and strangest--trip I ever made on Earth. My uncle picked us up at the airport in his flitter, and started right in on how great it was to be living in such a big city. Well, on the way out of the airport, he got confused by a construction detour--"

Christine laughed. "And got lost!"

Right!"

\*

Tai's brow was furrowed with the memories. "I was in a gang called the Space Pirates. About twenty-five of us with a lot of artificial reasons for mixing with a gang called the Dark Stars. Whenever we wanted to get them angry we'd call them the Black Holes, or some things a lot worse. There were about forty of them on the street that day..."

\*

"Six years he'd been in Johannesburg. Six years and it looked as though he was going to be spending the seventh one just trying to get to his own home! And my father! He was merciless to his brother! He kept saying things like, 'Well, here we are in the big city, where the favorite pastime is...getting lost!'. And when we'd been traveling north a few kilometers, and it became obvious that we were still lost, he said, 'I don't know how to tell you this, dear brother, but I think I see the pyramids appearing on the horizon...!'"

\*

"This fight had been brewing for a really long time. All it really needed was a crazy, hot afternoon and no peace officers on the street. Well,



it was the climax of a six-day heat-wave, and the 'peefs' were nowhere to be seen, probably hiding in the shade somewhere. The Stars came into the block from the north end, and the Pirates came in from the south, and..."

\*

"But my uncle wasn't laughing. In fact, he all but turned pale as he looked around at where we were. He said, 'Oh, God! We're in the Furnace!' That's a Johannesburg poverty area with a very poor reputation. He couldn't turn around because the street was one way, so he turned west and then got on the first south-bound avenue, which was also one-way."

\*

"...knives, crowbars, chains, even flying blades--they're fist-sized pieces of sheet metal with irregular, razor-sharp edges. Some guys could take off a man's hand at a hundred meters with one of those. Two hundred when the wind was right."

"You ever use one?"

"I'm not saying a word."

\*

"...and there we were, right in the middle of a street war! Two mobs of kids, all trying to kill one another, and we can't back up because there's a truck behind us whose driver won't back up!"

\*

"There were twenty of us in the street, set up in two waves, and five on the roofs on both sides of the street. 'Air support'. But they had a few of their own on the roofs, so the fight got to be just as bloody up there as it was in the street. And it was blo-o-o-o-ody!"

\*

"That truck is all but pushing us down the street, we're making sure the windows are up and tight, my uncle's inching the flitter forward..."

\*

"When our first wave clashed with their first wave, it sounded like a sonic boom. Felt like one, too. I was swinging a length of pipe like it was a broadsword..."

\*

"...keeps saying, 'Oh, God!' every five seconds, my father's gripping the dashboard, my mother's hugging me for dear life--"

"Sounds more like an airship crash."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? As for me, I'm feeling both repulsed and fascinated by what's going on around me. It was absolutely incredible..."

\*

"A fight like that could only last a couple of minutes, and we were winning. If you could call it that. No side ever really wins a war..."

\*



"...that truck driver was leaning on the horn...my mother started praying..."

\*

"And then it happened: one of the Stars on a roof really went crazy--I mean blood-fever *crazy*--with a phaser."

"A civilian? With a phaser?!!"

"How did he get it?"

"Who knows? All I know is he had it. A number one. See it: a crazy teen-ager on a three-story building, so spun out that he's shooting at anything that moves. And the thing's set on 'kill'!"

\*

"Poof! it takes out a piece of the street, right in front of the flitter!"

\*

"...and then--get this--he screams like a Tantalus resident and jumps off the roof!"

"You're blowing ions!"

"Truth! He lands on this wide ledge outside the second floor. The whole war's already coming to a fast halt, and anybody who isn't dead is either running or crawling for cover. And he starts firing again, and fries two of his own buddies..."

\*

"...and the truck driver has stopped his sonic blasts, but won't back up..."

\*

"...and a truck driver, right through the windshield--"

"Oh, God!"

"I guess that's what really got me moving. I ran straight for the doorway of the sniper's building--straight, except for one zig-zag that saved me from a frying--and took the stairs, three at a time..."

\*

"...Mother's screaming by now, and my father's screaming for my uncle to warp out--"

"And your uncle?"

"The poor man was so scared he'd turned to stone. He was gripping the steering wheel, but he wasn't driving. Besides, we couldn't move forward, anyway. Two of them were lying in the street just a few meters in front of us."

"Unconscious or dead?"

"I don't really remember. I prefer to think they were just unconscious..."

\*



"I looked over the roof edge, got myself positioned right over the guy, took a deep breath, and jumped, feet first..."

\*

"My father managed to twist the steering wheel and get his left foot on the accelerator. He maneuvered the flitter into a space between two parked vehicles and got us on the sidewalk. We were creeping along..."

\*

"...slammed right into his back. For a moment, I thought we would stay on the ledge, and that the phaser would drop out of his hand. But he held onto the phaser and we dropped..."

\*

"...two of them landed right on the hood..."

\*

"...we rolled off onto the curbside of the pavement, and he got to his feet before I could get to mine. Aimed that phaser right at me..."

\*

"...Mother was having another screaming fit, what with them being so close to us. I couldn't hit her, of course, so I guess I tried to end her fear by striking out at them. I lowered the window and swung at the nearest one with my left fist..."

\*

"...right in the jaw. He was so surprised, he didn't even fire, which was fine with me!"

\*

"...and that was when my father and I both realized that this was the one with the phaser! We both shook my uncle, he came out of his trance, hit the accelerator, and we took off..."

\*

"...He seemed to forget all about me, aimed at the people in the flitter. I swung the pipe and broke his firing arm. That's when he finally dropped the phaser..."

\*

"...got the flitter back into the street and didn't stop until we were well out of the Furnace."

\*

"...the peefs finally decided to show up, all on the full run. I kicked the phaser in their direction, then took off down one of our escape alleys. Those of us that got away went into camouflage for about a month..."

\*



"...and we were laughing about the whole thing by the time we got to my uncle's house. It was either that, or cry..."

\*

"...I had bad dreams for a couple of weeks..."



"That was one cosmic party, thanks to you..."

"It was all your idea, Tai. I just helped. Besides, you've already shown your gratitude."

"Yes, but that was for public consumption. Come over here, and I'll...get more personal..."

"My...we should throw parties more often, my love, if they're going to make you this romantic."

"That's an idea. Say, what were you and all those other women giggling about in the corner?"

"Oh, nothing much. Like you said, just giggling. Probably the same thing you and the others were doing around the punch bowl."

"I doubt it, lover. I doubt it."





# Bedroom Farce

by  
Joyce Gasner



"Out, out, out! I don't care if we are married; you're not sleeping with me!" Leia Organa slammed the door in Darth Vader's face, barely missing him.

For a moment Vader stood speechless with indignation, staring at the door. He hadn't had his bed shipped in from the Sith so that Leia Organa--all five feet and ninety pounds of her--could sleep in the middle of it while he spent the night in an armchair in the sitting room. It was too humiliating for words. Besides which, EN36 had taken to staring at him, as though it was his fault Leia had kicked him out of bed. The medical 'droid's concern was more than a proprietary one, too; EN sometimes stood more on Darth Vader's dignity than Vader did. Vader wondered, not for the first time, why he had agreed to marry Leia. Political alliances were all fine and good, but not if he would have to hobble around for the rest of his life with a sore back.

He permitted his respirator to force the air from his lungs and turned around. EN waited patiently across the room. "What are you staring at?" he demanded angrily of the 'droid, and threw himself into his chair.

EN said nothing for a few minutes, then came over to help him off with his boots. Vader wasn't fooled. EN would put his two-hundredths' of a credit worth in. It had become a set piece by now.

"This is not healthy for you, Master. You need your sleep," EN said. Every aspect of Vader's health was in EN's province; Vader just wished the 'droid wouldn't take his duty so seriously.

"Do you have a suggestion?" Vader asked.

"I would go in and claim my half of the bed," EN said. "She does not require your entire bed."

Vader scowled.

"Surely she would not assault you. It is too dangerous."

Vader doubted that. Leia Organa would assault anyone she pleased, and it would please her immensely to assault him.

"Wait until she falls asleep," EN suggested diplomatically.

"I'll consider it," Vader said. Putting his feet up on the ottoman, Vader drew his surcoat around him and settled in for an uncomfortable night.

He dozed fitfully for several hours, then made the unfortunate error of sitting up. The bright glow of EN's photoreceptors met him squarely. Cursing, Vader got up and strode to the bedroom door.

Leia had not even bothered locking it. Had it gotten to the point, he wondered, where she had him so well under control that she did not even fear his disobedience?

Casting one last look in EN's direction, Vader entered the bedroom. As expected, Leia was asleep in the center of the bed. She lay on her back, limbs outstretched, hair spread out on the pillows. In the light from the windows Vader could make out the faintest hint of a smile on



her lips; she was probably dreaming about that hick from Tatooine.

EN had come in behind him. The 'droid helped him undress for bed, then stole out of the room again. Vader claimed the edge of the bed, easing his weight down carefully.

He fell asleep quickly. He had had his bed built to size, and took great pleasure in the fact that his feet didn't hang over the end. The mattress was just firm enough. He didn't realize how tired he was until the princess woke him up.

She chose a rather crude method, too. Awakening and finding him perched precariously on the edge of the bed, she chose the simplest method for getting him out. Planting her foot in the small of his back, she pushed. He landed, dazed, in a heap on the floor.

He rolled onto his back and looked up. Leia was peering at him over the edge of the mattress. Her head disappeared quickly. At first there were a few muffled snorts, then she started to laugh. She was guffawing helplessly by the time he stomped out of the room.

EN, Vader noted dourly, didn't say anything; Vader wouldn't have needed much of an excuse to reduce the 'droid to scrap.

Still smarting from his humiliation, Vader left the room the next morning before Leia got up. The rebels who saw him knew from the set of his shoulders that he was in a more surly mood than usual and carefully avoided him.

The next night, EN made no suggestions about Vader claiming his half of the bed. Vader wrapped himself in his cloak and retired to his chair.

He awoke a few hours past midnight, cold, cramped, and irritable. He had been married to Leia Organa for six weeks, and not only hadn't he enjoyed anything bearing a resemblance to his conjugal rights, he hadn't even had a decent night's sleep. Was there no justice in the universe? He was one of the most powerful men in the galaxy. He was Leia's husband. It was *his* bed.

This time Leia had taken the precaution of locking the bedroom door. Vader, however, had a print of the lock. He used it to let himself in.

Leia looked much the way she had last night: she was sprawled in the middle of the bed, sound asleep, oblivious to the world. Vader did not bother waking her up. Snatching the blanket off her, he got a firm grip on the mattress and heaved. Leia rolled off and landed with a satisfactory thump on the floor on the other side. Pulling the mattress back onto the bedframe, Vader got in, arranged the covers over himself, and made it clear he had no intention of moving.

It was now Leia's turn to stomp out and spend the night in the armchair.

Neither Vader nor Leia knew if anyone else was aware of their domestic arrangements. Either of them would have cheerfully killed anyone who did. It was noticeable only that Vader's mood had improved while Leia was now the decidedly more short-tempered of the pair.

Another week went by. Vader slept blissfully, if alone, in his giant bed. He had almost begun to believe that being married to Leia wasn't the worst thing that could have happened to him. Then, one night, Leia sneaked into his room.

It was well nigh impossible for anyone to tell whether he was asleep by listening to his breathing. The respirator hissed at a constant rate no matter what condition he was in. Vader kept a cautious eye on Leia as she stole toward the bed. She wasn't armed, which was a good sign, but he doubted that she was up to any good. He carefully calculated the odds of besting her without doing her any serious harm.

Vader held himself absolutely still as Leia crept closer. Finally, she reached the bed. Ever so carefully she eased her weight onto the edge of the bed, her eyes glued to his face. When he didn't move, she swung her legs up and laid down. Then, gently, she tugged on his blanket. Reluctantly, Vader let a few inches slide toward her. She tugged again, and he let go of just enough blanket for her to cover herself. For several minutes she lay staring at him, unaware that he was wide awake and staring back. Finally, her eyes flickered shut.

Vader was beside himself with pleasure. Shifting his weight and grunting theatrically, he did everything short of announcing it to let Leia know he was wide awake and aware of her presence beside him. Then he subsided. He liked Leia Organa, he really did, and he had grown tired of their vicious game.

From that night on they shared the same bed, although they got undressed separately and one would wait until the other was apparently asleep before climbing under the covers. This was the closest they had come to a normal domestic relationship after two months of marriage.

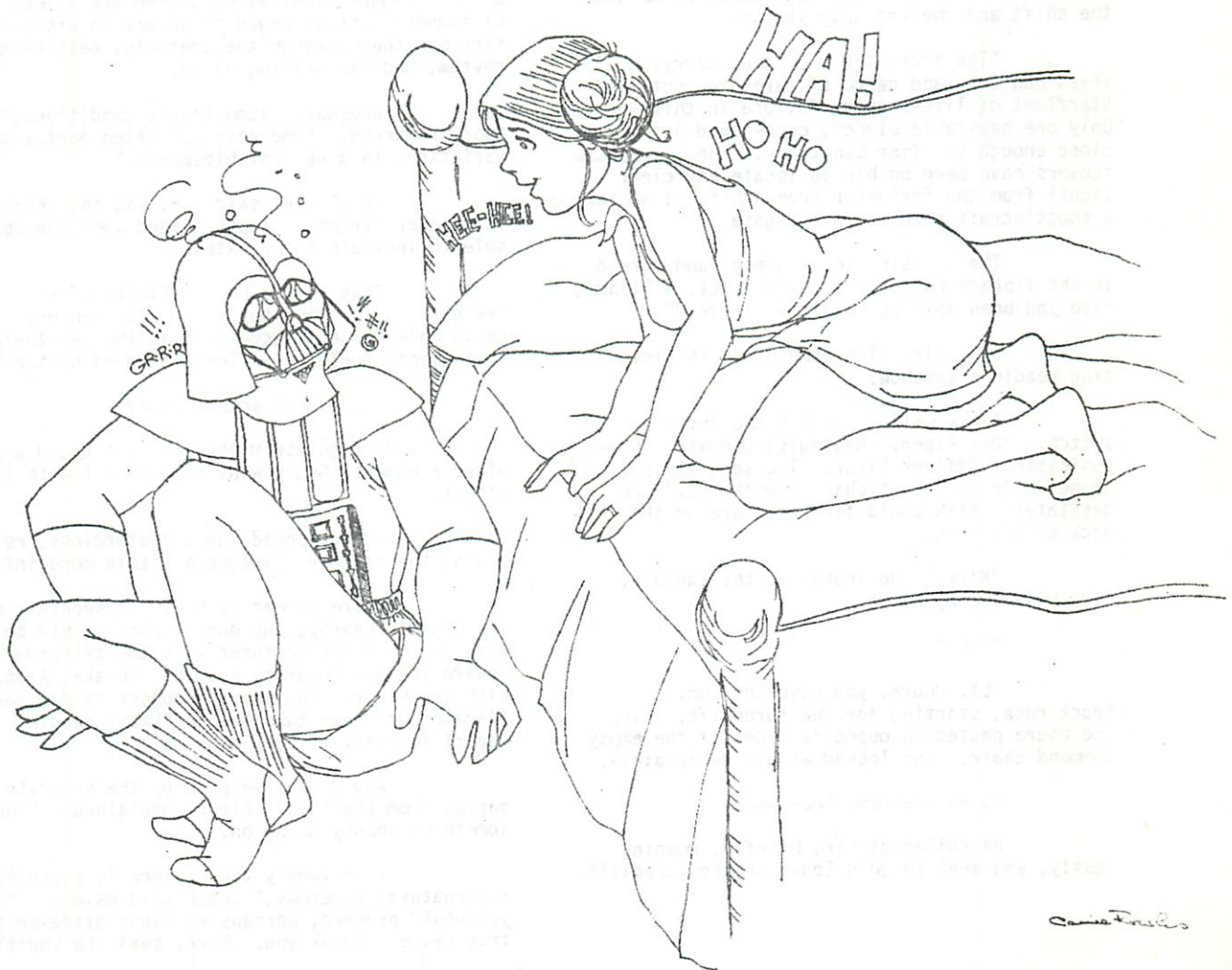
The war against the Empire was going well. Sith and Alliance forces had yet to go into battle together, but individually they were winning significant victories. Neither Leia Organa nor Darth Vader had had any hope of beating the emperor separately. Together, they were whipping him blind. What would happen when the emperor was finally defeated neither side much wanted to think about. Privately they believed they would have to fight. They just hoped there'd be something left for the survivor.



was violating the rules.

Vader had gotten into bed first that night. He was almost asleep when Leia crawled in beside him. They had worked out the apportioning of bed and blankets over the past few weeks. Now, for some inexplicable reason, Leia

Not content to remain in her half of the bed, she had slid over into his. He ignored her, although he was on guard against a renewal in hostilities. Carefully, Leia pressed her body against his back. Propping herself up on one elbow, she let her hair fall over his face as she softly whispered in his ear, "What do your buttons do?"







# ARIKA

by Eileen Roy



"Captain's Log, stardate 1297.6: Captain Spock recording." The figure in the command chair swung around as he entered, surveyed him dispassionately and nodded.

"Sir," Lt. Commander Kirk said. He was exactly on time, as usual. The new captain was early, as usual. Kirk crossed to his navigation station, listening to the log report as he took the shift and checked duty status.

"The freighter *Rosy Lee*, carrying a seven man crew and cargo of rare ore, notified Starfleet of life-support failure in this sector. Only one habitable planet, code-named Arika, was close enough to offer sanctuary. The *Enterprise* sensors have been unable to locate any clear signal from the freighter from orbit. I am taking a shuttlecraft down to investigate."

The captain close channel and turned to the library computer station. "Lt. Williams, have you been able to obtain a fix yet?"

"No, sir. The atmosphere is distorting readings somehow."

"Very well." He hit the intercom switch. "Dr. Piper. Geologist D'Amato. Communications Officer Fleur. Two security personnel. To the shuttlebay. Spock out." He hesitated. Kirk could feel the gaze on the back of his neck.

"Kirk." He looked at the captain. "You will accompany me."

"Sir."

"Lt. Uhura, you have the con." Spock rose, starting for the turbolift. Kirk and Uhura paused on opposite sides of the empty command chair. She looked at him uncertainly.

*It should have been mine.*

He smiled at her, briefly, meaninglessly, and went to join Spock in the turbolift.

The flight down was rough. Wind currents buffeted them like a shuttle in a giant's game, and magnetic eddies fluctuated in a maddening, not-quite-predictable pattern. Kirk fought through them.

He felt, rather than saw, Spock sit down beside him, working at the shipboard computer. Figures indicating degree and direction of magnetic stress began to appear on his board. Kirk put them through the controls, getting the rhythm, and the jarring eased.

"Unusually atmospheric conditions," Spock remarked. "One does not often meet such variations in a natural biosphere."

"Yes," Kirk said. He had the shuttle in thicker air now. Spock leaned over the console to indicate coordinates.

"That is the best estimate of the freighter's location the *Enterprise* sensors could make." He glanced down at the *Galileo's* instruments ruefully. "These seem no better."

"Sir," Kirk acknowledged.

He might or might not have heard a sigh. After a moment, Spock went back to sit with the others.

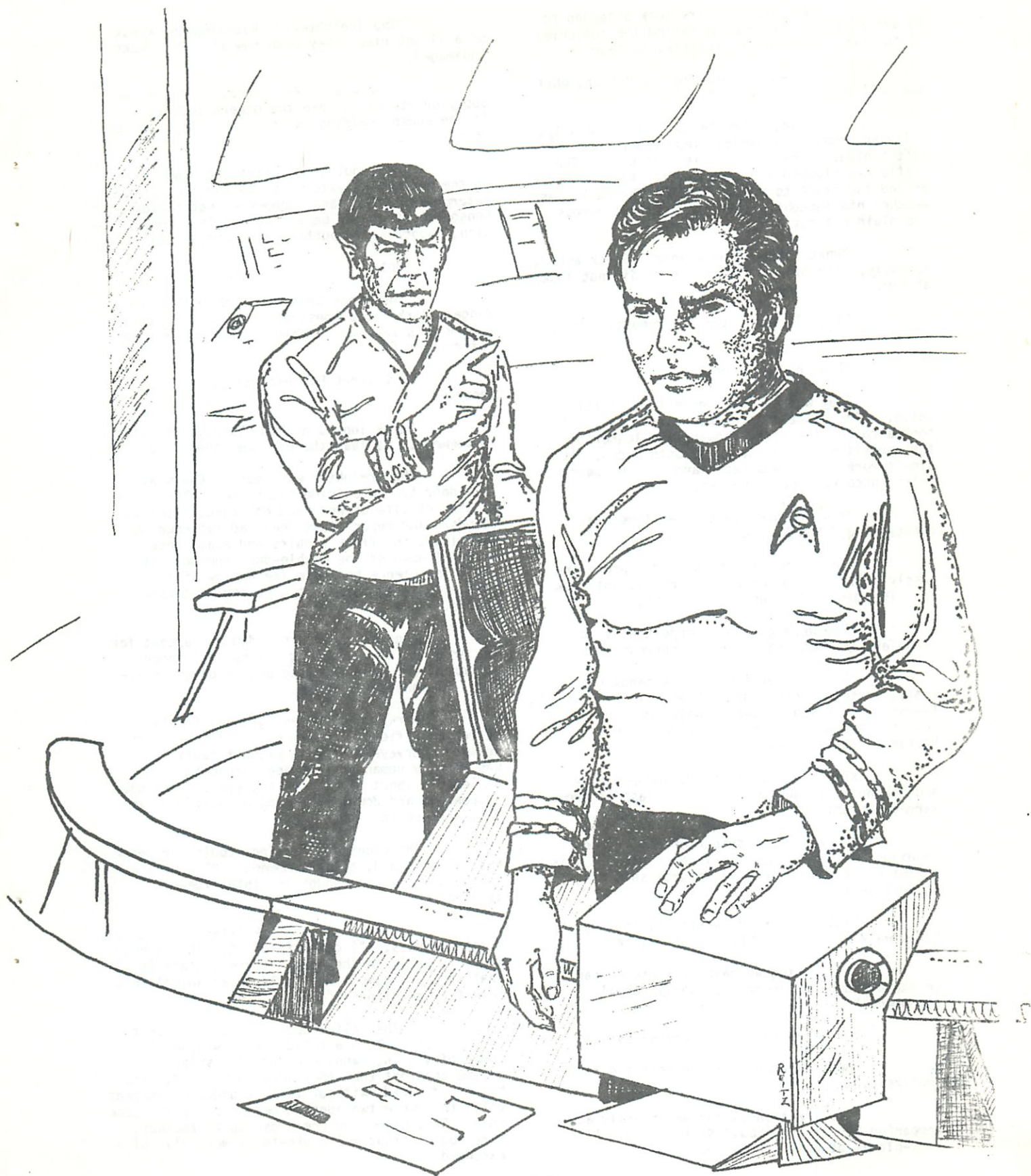
Once grounded, on a featureless, rolling plain, the sensors divulged a little more information.

"There appear to be three separate metallic objects nearby, any one of which could be the *Rosy Lee*. Spock gestured with the tricorder toward the two security people. "Blake, Avon, go with Dr. Piper. The nearest object is due south. D'Amato and Fleur take the northeast reading. Report in every fifteen minutes."

"Why didn't we pick up the separate masses from the ship?" Fleur complained. "There's something spooky going on...."

"I seriously doubt there is anything supernatural underway," Spock said calmly. "If you would proceed, perhaps we might discover the true cause? Thank you. Kirk, seal the shuttle."







Shuttle sealed, Kirk took a second to go after Fleur. He came up behind the com chief on the other side of the shuttle, to hear:

"...god-damn cold-blooded Vulcan, what the hell does he think he is--"

"Captain," Kirk said. "Of, hopefully, a living crew." He handed Fleur the phaser he'd left behind. "Try and keep it that way?" The little man flushed and strode off. Kirk ducked around the craft to rejoin Spock. The dark eyes watched him thoughtfully. They set out across the plain without a word.

"What happened on Axanar?" Spock asked, abruptly, five minutes later. Kirk did not look at him.

"I would think the log reports are... quite clear."

"I wish *your* version."

They walked in silence for a little while. "The peace mission was going badly. I took a calculated risk, showing the leader of the opposition prison camps of both sides. It didn't work, and I was reprimanded. The peace talks succeeded, nevertheless."

"Your record, up to that time, was... outstanding," Spock said.

"Until Axanar," Kirk said expressionlessly. "If it had worked..." He did not look up. The *Enterprise* was out of sight.

"You were given the opportunity to transfer, to 'make good' in new surroundings."

"As First Officer." His hands hung empty, loose, at his sides. "Yes. I took the transfer." They had stopped walking; were looking straight at each other. An unseen battle of strengths--

Kirk's eyes, startled, snapped away and behind. "I saw something. A flash of brown, large. An animal?"

Spock had the tricorder out. "The readings are ambiguous. It is possible... This planet has a most effective natural shielding against sensors."

"Natural?" Kirk questions, as they began walking again. "Why not artificial?"

"Everything we have encountered can be explained by reference to wholly normal phenomena."

"Or a sophisticated defense system."

Spock glanced over the deserted plain. "Unlikely."

"Civilization is not necessarily accompanied by outward show," Kirk argued. "The park-planet of Ball'eta Seven..."

"The freighter." Rounding the crest of a slight rise, they both saw it. "It looks undamaged."

"Then what," Kirk said, in a dangerously quiet voice, "are the others looking for? If the sensor readings were a trick to separate us--"

They couldn't contact the other parties, or the automatic systems on the shuttle, or the *Enterprise*. "The same phenomena that confuses sensor readings may be acting to block communication," Spock said, putting his communicator away.

"But--"

"There has been no overt indication of danger, Kirk. I suggest we proceed. The crew of the *Rosy Lee* may be able to furnish us with information."

Kirk shook his head slowly. "It looks deserted."

Spock looked at him sharply but offered no comment. He lead the way down the slope.

The freighter was empty. Every air-lock door to the outside stood open. There was no sign of life or what had happened, after the standard log report that they had set down on the planet to effect repairs and await rescue. Kirk sat down at the double-duty communications and life science board in the narrow little bridge, playing the dials. He couldn't raise anyone.

"Again, no internal damage, except for the original air-recycling breakdown," Spock muttered, emerging from the bowels of engineering. "I cannot-- Kirk!"

Kirk looked up and grabbed for the screen magnifiers. The alien, a half-click or so away, surveyed the ship without caution. It was roughly humanoid in shape, brown-furred, with a flexible short tube below the eyes. The tube snapped up and down, like a nose snuffling, as they watched it.

"No signs of clothing, tools, or weapons," Spock said, after a moment. "The braincase is not quite large enough for intelligence.... Is it alone?"

"I can't tell." Kirk tried to coax obdurate sensors. "I don't think so. It may not keep its brain in the head. There's space in that shoulder hump. And wouldn't an animal show more fear reactions--"

Another alien appeared, to the right of the first. Then a third. Kirk widened the angle of vision, panning around the ship. It became apparent that they were surrounded. The beings advanced, without fear or undue excitement, until they were two hundred meters or so from the ship. Switching from one close-up to another, Kirk noticed that the mouth-tubes were all fully extended now.



The piping began. It pierced through his eardrums like searing cold needles. Kirk pressed his hands to his ears, shaking his head violently.

"The ship!" Spock called, face contorted. "Get--out of the ship!" He wavered and fell. Kirk stumbled over him, half-blind. Dropping to hands and knees, he swayed, panting. His head brushed the metal wall and pain stabbed through his skull like a pick. With an effort, he stooped and pulled Spock after him, down the short hatchway, toward the nearest airlock. It was worse in the narrow corridor. His bones screamed at him, and Spock was a dead weight.

They tumbled out of the airlock together, landing under the curve of hull. The pressure eased immediately. The piping was still present but somehow more endurable. After a moment he could hear again. The sound came from nothing in the outside world. The ship, the plains, the waiting aliens, all were totally silent.

Kirk nodded, putting it together. The aliens had some kind of natural, powerful control over the environment. The atmospheric barrier, the confusion of sensor readings, this eerie mind-weapon--they were responsible for it all.

What could they do to the *Enterprise*?

"Sir!" He shook Spock. The Vulcan seemed in a half-daze, not fully conscious, and Kirk had no idea of whether that was a normal state for his species or not. "Sir, we have to get back to the shuttle."

Spock shook his head, in negation or confusion. He mumbled something.

"Sir, we have to warn the *Enterprise*...."

"No." The one word was clear, and a slim-fingered hand closed about his wrist like steel. "We...stay."

Kirk got up on his knees, helpless, frantic. The ship must be warned. It would be difficult making it back, with Spock incapacitated, but--

He could get back alone.

He glanced at the line of aliens, slowly closing, then down at the limp figure beside him. The captain of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*.

*It's my ship.*

He broke the hold on his wrist with one quick movement and rose, judging the line in front of him with an expert's eyes. The phaser might not work against them. But they didn't seem particularly fast, and if all they had were immaterial weapons... There was a gap to his left, beside the small alien sucking on something. Curious. The shape seemed

familiar....

Kirk sank down to his haunches, sickly revising opinions. Spock looked up wearily a few seconds later. He seemed puzzled to see Kirk. "You're still--"

"You were right," Kirk interrupted. "They're animals." He pointed. "People don't usually eat their meat raw." The half-grown alien was worrying part of a human limb. Spock sighed quietly.

"I surmised as much."

"But that mind-weapon--"

"Ultra-sonics. The metal corridors of the *Roby Lee* were resonators. The standing wave inside amplified the natural power--impressively." Spock shook his head warily. Kirk looked at the aliens with new attention and Spock added sharply, "Kirk, face me when you speak. My hearing has not yet returned."

"Yes, sir. Then--we know what happened to the crew of the *Roby Lee*."

"Some may have escaped. We must know for sure." Spock got to his feet with some effort. "Set your phaser on stun. If I walk toward them, slowly, they may be startled enough at the uncharacteristic behavior to flee." He looked straight at Kirk. His voice flung a challenge. "Cover me."

Startled, Kirk's head went up. He stared back at the Vulcan, and, gradually, a tiny smile pulled at the corner of his mouth.

"Yes, sir."

"...bodies of all seven crewmembers were recovered and brought aboard the *Enterprise* for interment. The extra metallic masses proved to be cargo holds, detached in the atmosphere entry. The natives show some signs of developing intelligence, and I suggest an anthropological team keep careful watch over them. A geophysical research team would find much to study in the natural interference effect of sensor rays on the planet's surface. All members of the landing party conducted themselves--admirably, under somewhat mysterious circumstances." Spock finished the log report.

"Mr. Kirk."

"Yes, sir?"

"Course 7.7 mark 5. Starbase fifteen."

Kirk looked back and smiled a little. "Laid in, sir," as his fingers moved lovingly over the well-known board.

*She's my ship...*

*And he's my captain.*



# THE PROMISE

Anne Elizabeth Zeek



*"Told you, I did," Yoda said sorrowfully as the sleek fighter craft began to lift into the misty heavens. "Reckless is he. Now things are going to worse."*

*"That boy is our last hope," Ben Kenobi said, his voice heavy with emotion.*

*"No," Kenobi's former teacher corrected with a knowing gleam in his large eyes, "there is another." \**

\*\*\*

Leia stared critically at herself in the full-length mirror, her mind calmly analyzing the cycles, the nausea. With computer-like rapidity she cross-referenced and integrated the information needed, added data, arrived at the logical result.

There was nothing coldly rational about the expression on her face as she gently placed her hands on her rounding stomach.

"Holy Mother," breathed Leia. "Holy Mother Mōrga, I'm pregnant."

\*\*\*

\* See "THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK" by Donald Glut, the novelization based on the story by George Lucas. Ballantine Books.



# SUSPENSION by Glen Larson

(The BUCK ROGERS Theme Song)

Far beyond the world I've known,  
Far beyond my time--  
What am I? Who am I?  
What will I be?  
Where am I going? And what will I see?

Searching my mind for some truths to reveal--  
What thoughts are fantasy?  
What mem'ries real?

Long before this life of mine,  
Long before this time--  
What was there? Who cared  
To make it begin?  
Is it forever? Or will it all end?

Searching my past for things that I've seen--  
Is it my life?  
Or just something I dreamed?

Far beyond this world I've known,  
Far beyond my time--  
What kind of world am I  
Going to find?  
Will it be real or just all in my mind?

What am I? Who am I?  
What will I be?  
Where am I going? And what will I see?

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# A LONG TIME AGO IN THE 25<sup>th</sup> CENTURY FAR, FAR AWAY...

BY SHERYL ADSIT

The anomaly that registered so curiously on his instrumentation was just beyond his assigned patrol area.

"Hey, Theopolis," he called over his shoulder, "stop gawkin' out the window like a tourist and check out the dopplergrav reading. Ever see anything like it?"

"No, Buck, I haven't," came the soft-spoken reply. "Those figures should not be possible; they are outside the parameters postulated by current space-time theories."

"It looked that way to me, too, but I thought I might be a bit behind on such astrophysical details."

\*BDBDBD\* said the other passenger.

"What'd he say?"

"He said, 'That is an understatement.'"

"Don't I know it," agreed Buck Rogers, 20th century astronaut who had slept his way through a freak accident into the 25th century. "Now aren't you glad you decided to come along as an observer on this mission, Theo? This'll give you something new to talk about at Computer Council." His hands began to move over the controls.

"Well, I must admit that discussing the same old problems tends to stifle creative impulses, but--what are you doing, Buck?" The effects of the course changes were making themselves felt.

"Gonna have a little look-see, that's all," replied Captain Rogers, aiming for a point

a slight distance away from the anomaly's apparent location.

"That is out of your patrol area, Buck. If you deviate now, you will not be able to complete your assigned pattern."

"Aw, c'mon, fellas. You chicken?" he taunted.

\*BDBDBD--CLUCK!\*

"Twiki said--"

"I know what he said, Theo, but--uh oh."

A trace of concern could be detected in the computer's response. "That new ship on the screen is not Colonel Deering?"

"Not unless she signed up for cross-training with the Draconian pirates," answered Buck grimly as he prepared his ship for combat.

\*BDBDBD--UH OH!\*

"You two just sit tight back there and let ol' Buck take care of things." The Earth Directorate ship began a few evasive maneuvers which were not among those preprogrammed into the combat computer.

"May I make a suggestion?"

"Sure, Theo. Shoot."

"I know your maneuvers tend to be--hm--highly unorthodox--"

"That's putting it politely."



"--but it might be wise to avoid the vicinity of the anomaly. The magnechronic fluctuations would seem to indicate distortion of space and time is taking place. I cannot determine what effect this might have upon us, but I do not think we should risk it."

"So we're between a rock and a hard place, eh?"

\*BDBDBD--THREE ROCKS\*

"Those Draconians never did care for a game of one-on-one," muttered the pilot.

With arrogant confidence in their numerical superiority, the Draconian offensive was strictly "by the book." Maintaining a loosely triangular formation, they began their approach.

\*BDBDBDBD\*

"Hm?"

"Twiki wants to know why we have slowed down," translated Theopolis, "and I would like to know why you have ceased your evasive maneuvers."

"I just thought I'd give these guys a chance to get into the game."

"You know that Emperor Draco has posted a reward for your capture--" The computer did not sound reassured.

"Frankly, he's not my type," muttered Buck.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I told Princess Ardala her father's seat was not what I had in mind."

"I am afraid I do not understand you, Buck," Theo chided.

"Sorry. You had to have been there, I guess."

"Returning to the situation at hand, Buck, I am afraid you are a 'sitting duck' for a tractor net." Green energy beams began to glow between the pirate ships as if to confirm this observation.

"Ah, then I'm a success as a decoy," Buck grinned.

"What do you mean, 'decoy'?"

"Well, Theo, you were the one who brought up the subject of duck hunting--"

\*BDBDBDBDBD--BUCK HUNTING\*

"Cute, Twiki," commented the pilot. "Theo, assuming there is no change in our speed or course, plot a projection of the position of the lead Draconian ship when the tractor net will be capable of snagging us."

There were a few seconds of silence as the computer worked. "He would be at the exact

center of the anomalous disturbance," he answered quietly.

"Two points for observation, Theo. Rather than hanging around, though, this 'duck' is going to 'dodge' at the last minute with a little well-timed acceleration."

"Well," Theo admitted grudgingly, "I suppose this 'decoy' business will provide us with some empirical data on the phenomenon."

"Look sharp, gang. We're almost at contact point." Buck could almost hear the Draconian group leader gloating over the apparently easy conquest. Evidently his equipment did not register the anomaly, or he was ignoring it in pursuit of his quarry, because he blithely flew into it without trying to avoid it. Incredibly brilliant light exploded soundlessly around Buck as he accelerated past. The other two pirate ships, joined to their leader by the tractor net, were sucked into the coruscating colors that blazed at the anomaly's heart, burning even brighter with the added energy.

Suddenly Buck felt as though thousands of tiny feet paraded over his body. In the background he heard Twiki screech thinly as Theopolis mumbled incoherently. Everything was spinning in three directions at once. He was fighting a rising nausea that calmed as suddenly as it began when the other effects vanished.

"Whew!" he sighed. "I wouldn't want to do that again." Silence was the only response for several minutes. "Hey, you two, this is the quietest you've been since we started this mission."

"I am sorry, Buck," Theo replied slowly. "I am afraid that Twiki and I are not as capable of the same quick recovery as an organic entity such as yourself."

"You guys okay?" the pilot asked worriedly.

\*BDBDBD\* The drone's response was muted, but reassuring nonetheless.

"I believe we have passed the nadir--" Theo began.

"Ralph will be glad to hear it," interjected the pilot.

"I beg your pardon?"

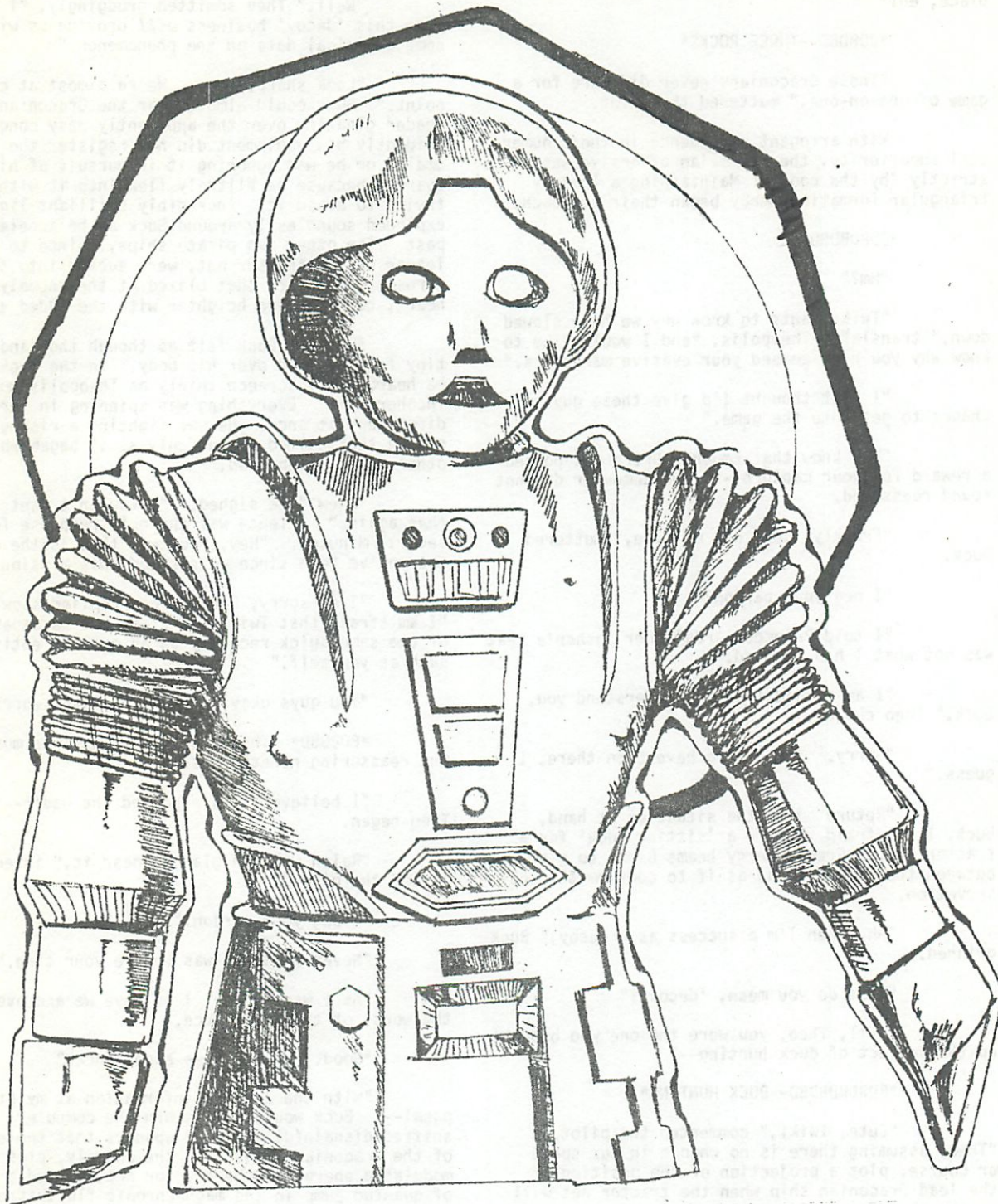
"Never mind; it was before your time."

"As I was saying, I believe we are over the worst of the experience."

"Good. What did we experience?"

"With the limited information at my disposal--" Buck would have sworn the computer sniffed disdainfully, "--it appears that the entry of the Draconian ships into the anomaly, plus the modulated energy of the tractor net, caused a sort of quantum jump in the magnechronic fluctuations, expanding the area of influence to include our ship. We are indeed fortunate to have been touched by the fringe effects rather than the total disruption experienced by the pirates."







"Sounds good to me--I think," Buck said. "How does going home sound to you?"

\*BDBDBD--RIGHT ON!\*

"Well, if we're all agreed--"

"Hold your present course, buddy," crackled from the speaker, "or what I don't shoot down, will."

"Aren't you getting tired of that routine, Wilma?" asked Captain Rogers.

"There's no-one named Wilma here, buddy. Just do as you're told and you'll arrive in one piece." Buck realized the voice was definitely masculine and turned to look for the source. He found it flying next to him.

"Uh, Theo," he said, hand over the mike, "how familiar are you with ship design?"

"In addition to those that I helped design myself, I have access to all designs on record with the Computer Council, including several alien types," replied Theo smugly.

"Then take a look out the window and identify that one. It's new to me, but then a lot of things are."

There was a brief pause, then the computer announced, "I have no record of any ship with an X-wing configuration, Buck."

"Great. Playing with the Draconians wasn't enough, we have to entertain new kids, too." Rogers began to check for possible damage to the ship's combat equipment.

"Uh, Buck," Theopolis was plainly hesitant to speak, "have you checked our present position?"

"Not since we passed through whatever it was. We can't have gone far." In spite of his apparent confidence, he glanced at his instruments. His next remark was not confident at all. "Theo, where are we?"

"We are nowhere in known space, or shall I say, space as we know it," came the soft reply. "I recommend we do as the pilot suggests."

"Listen to your friend, buddy." Again the speaker crackled and Buck realized he had let his hand slip from over the microphone, allowing the stranger to hear Theo's remarks on their whereabouts, or lack thereof. "Now if you'll just tell me who you are and what you're doing in the Yavin system, we'll see about arranging for you to land."

"I am Captain William Rogers. I was flying a routine scout patrol in my own system when I was attacked by three Draconian pirates. There was a space-time anomaly in the vicinity which expanded when they made contact with it. Somehow I was transported here." Buck had the strangest feeling he sounded like Wilma on that last speech, all factual and proper. He determined to improve his style. "If you could just give me directions, I'd be glad to go home and play in my own yard."

He smiled hopefully in the direction of the unknown pilot's ship.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, fella. Our patrol orders are to intercept and destroy any Imperial ships that might have survived the Death Star. You appeared from the center of the Death Star's location--" the pilot sounded somewhat puzzled at that, "but you don't look like any Imperial ship I've ever seen. My Artoo unit can't identify you either, so I'm taking you in. Just follow me and you'll be safe, although I think I should warn you that the base defense system is still in place and will blast you out of the sky if you try anything."

With that last remark the pilot arrowed down to the surface of the small moon they had been approaching during the conversation.

Buck followed immediately, but couldn't resist remarking to Theopolis, "I hope being captured like this isn't habit-forming; this is the second time around for me."

"It is the third time, actually, Buck, if you count your capture by the Draconians," corrected the computer.

"I wasn't awake then. I don't think it should as capture so much as it might, say, as, uh, kidnapping--"

\*BDBDBD--SOME KID\*

"Enjoy this flight while you can, Twiki; it may be the last one you go on with me," Buck said.

\*BDBDBD--PROMISE?\*

"C'mon, guys, you know you love it."

Conversation lagged slightly as Captain Rogers concentrated on landing in the small clearing used by his guide. They were surrounded by dense rainforest, but they had flown over several weathered structures en route. Prudently, Buck decided to wait for his escort to approach before climbing out of the cockpit. A figure in an orange flight suit emerged from the X-wing and came over to the Earth ship and waved for them to follow him.

As Rogers was helping Twiki and Theo out of their seat, he noticed groups of curious workers gathering at the edge of the clearing. They were obviously interested in his ship. "Take a picture; it'll last longer," he muttered.

The pilot in orange helped them down. "You'll have to forgive the techs," he said. "They so rarely get anything other than beat up old X- and Y-wings to work on. They're still upset that Solo wouldn't let them near the *Millennium Falcon*."

"You'll have to forgive me," Buck replied, "I have no idea where we are and who or what you're talking about."

"Hm." The pilot appeared to be considering that idea for the first time. "Well, I suppose



a lot of stuff may be restricted until you're checked out, but I can supply you with one name: I'm Wedge Antilles."

\*BDBDBDBDBD\*

"This is no time for jokes, Twiki," answered Theopolis.

Wedge stared at the two of them. "I've never heard of a droid with two voices before."

Now it was Buck's turn for introductions. "That's because you've never met *this* odd couple. The drone here is Twiki--" he indicated with a pat on the head, "--and that thing around his neck is Dr. Theopolis, a member of the Computer Council back home."

"You let mechanicals sit on your council?" Antilles made it sound like purest heresy."

"They *are* the council; we poor flesh-and-blood types have proven our fallibility and yielded," answered Buck with mock resignation. "Things are different around here?"

Wedge turned to Twiki and Theo. "Please accept my apologies for any disrespect you may have perceived; none was intended. Many of us here are in favor of equal rights for droids." Formalities over, he smiled at Buck. "I'm sure you will have a great deal to share with *our* council. Let's not keep them waiting." He headed toward the nearer stone structure, Twiki and Buck falling in behind.

When Antilles was several meters ahead of them, Buck asked, "What did you say earlier, Twiki, that bothered Theo?"

\*BDBDBDBDBD\* repeated the drone.

"Twiki thinks he knows where we are from the pilot's name," interpreted the computer.

"Oh?"

"The Bermuda Triangle," was all that Theo would add.

Buck groaned. "That's terrible, Twiki. Where did you hear about--" Suddenly everything was spinning again. Millions of multi-colored specks danced before Buck's eyes, interacting with his dizziness until the blackness that followed was almost a relief. He didn't even feel the impact of the pavement.

When reality began to make sense again, his first impression was of lying on his back in a large, darkened room. The second, following immediately upon opening his eyes, was that his head hurt intensely.

"Oooh," he gasped and closed his eyes again. The voices that were on the edge of his awareness stopped and footsteps approached.

"I think he's coming around, Princess," said a young male voice next to him.

Princess? thought Buck. *I didn't realize deja vu would be so painful.*

"Get Dr. Farber in here." The voice was feminine and spoke with authority.

Buck tried opening his eyes again, slowly this time. In the dim light he saw a blond kid just out of his teens and a dark-haired young woman leaning over him.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"My head hurts," he answered.

"Dr. Farber will give you something for the pain when she gets here."

*I'm gonna hate myself for saying this,* but--"Are you really a princess?" Buck asked.

The young woman smiled, but there was sadness in her eyes. "Yes, the title is mine, although my world was destroyed by the Death Star."

"Death Star? The pilot that escorted me here mentioned something about a Death Star--"

"Well, you don't have to worry about it," interrupted the youth, "'cause it's all been blown into hyperspace."

"Which may be why Captain Rogers is now enjoying our hospitality." Buck could see the silhouette of someone in the doorway, evidently the source of the remark. "Or, should I say, he would be enjoying it if you allowed him to recover from his headache before you started telling him your war stories."

The two young people made a place beside the bed for the newcomer, a tall, handsome, older woman with silver at her temples and sparkling gray eyes. "How do you do, Captain Rogers. I'm Dr. Farber. I have something here which should take care of the pain."

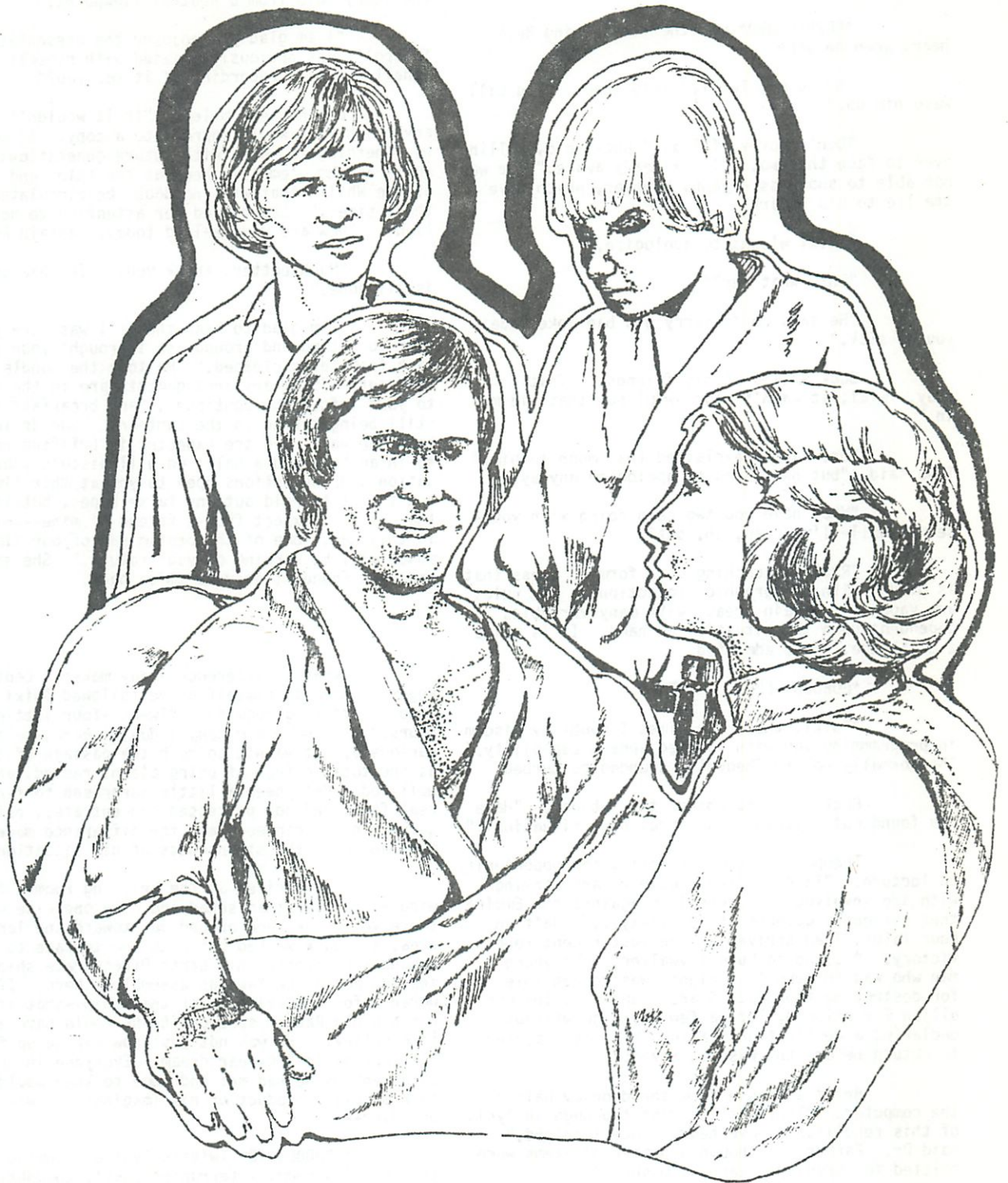
He heard the injection more than he felt it. Almost immediately the edge came off the skull-rending ache, although it took a few more minutes for the worst of it to disappear.

"Hey, I think I should warn you," Buck spoke up, "I tend to get a little silly under the influence of this stuff. I've been told I say the most ridiculous things."

"Well, you won't have to worry about making conversation for now," Dr. Farber assured him. "I want you to rest for a while. You still haven't recovered fully from the experience that brought you here." She started to shoo the young couple out, then turned back to add, "By the way, your droids are doing fine. Our specialists gave them a complete check-out. You don't need to worry about them."

"Thanks," Buck said, closing his eyes. He felt suddenly tired, as *though all the energy* had been drained from his body. Before the door shut completely he heard the kid remark, "I can't imagine anything more ridiculous than the story he told Wedge. I think we should question him now."







Buck smiled softly to himself. *This may not be home, but they know what paranoia is.* For some strange reason that made him feel more secure, and he slept.

\*BDBDBDBD\* was the first thing Buck heard when he woke.

"Be quiet, Twiki," said Theo. "You will wake him up."

"Don't worry, fellas," Buck said, rolling over to face the two. "I'm already awake." He was not able to suppress a yawn, however, which gave the lie to his remark.

"Twiki wishes to apologize."

"Oh? What for?"

"He says he is sorry his bad joke made you so sick."

Buck smiled at his friends. "That's okay, Twiki; it wasn't your awful pun that did me in."

"Dr. Farber explained that much to him," Theo said, "but he wanted to apologize anyway."

"What have you two been doing with yourselves while I've been, uh, out?"

"R2D2 is teaching us a form of chess that is played with holographic projections. The rules are vague in certain areas, with many variables dependent upon the situation at hand. It is quite a challenge," Theo admitted.

\*BDBDBD--CHECK, MATE\*

"Twiki, there are times I doubt my wisdom in programming you with limited speech capability." The normally polite Theopolis sounded perturbed.

Buck tried to change the subject. "Have you found out anything else about our 'situation'?"

Theopolis could not resist the opportunity to lecture. "It seems the people we are staying with are involved in a rebellion against the Empire that currently governs their galaxy..." Half an hour later, Theo arrived at the most recent rebel victory. "...and so Luke Skywalker, that young man who was in here last night, was responsible for destroying the Death Star. Han Solo, the Correllian I mentioned, left a few days ago without declaring a destination,\* although he is expected to return before the base is moved."

Brief applause from the doorway halted the computer. "That was the most thorough analysis of this rebellion I have heard since I joined," said Dr. Farber, "although a number of items were omitted for brevity's sake, I'm sure."

\* see "Souvenirs of Alderaan" by Sheryl Adsit, TIME WARP #3.

Buck sat up as she approached and was pleased to note the complete absence of his headache.

"Excuse me for eavesdropping," the doctor continued, "but it was quite interesting to hear the story told from a neutral viewpoint."

"I am glad you enjoyed the presentation," Theopolis was obviously pleased with himself. "Shall I make a recording of it for you?"

Dr. Farber smiled. "If it wouldn't be any trouble, I would appreciate a copy. It would be something to share with future generations--not quite as, hm, 'embellished' as the tales and legends of the Whills that will no doubt be circulated about these times." She turned her attention to her patient. "How are you feeling today, Captain Rogers?"

"Much better, thank you, The headache is all gone."

"I'm glad to hear that. I was sure you'd want to get up and around, so I brought your clothes back from being cleaned." He took the bundle she held out. "Sanitary arrangements are in the cubicle to your left," she continued, "and breakfast is still being served in the canteen. Your droids know the way. You are expected in briefing room #3 in an hour and a half; we will discuss your situation and the options open to you at that time. I don't want to hold out any false hopes, but if I get the answer I expect from a friend of mine--well, put it this way, some of the best minds of our time and space will be working on your return." She smiled, and Buck found it easy to smile back.

"What a difference a day makes," Captain Rogers hummed to himself as he followed Twiki and Theo to briefing room #3. "Twenty-four little hours." *I wonder how long a day is here,* he thought curiously. It wasn't so much the passage of time as the total effect of being clean, rested, and well-fed. He'd been a little surprised to find real food, and not processed concentrates, being served in the canteen, and the difference made him more aware of the strangeness of his situation.

They arrived at the briefing room a few minutes earlier than scheduled. No one else was there yet. The room opened out toward the landing area, and Buck walked out onto the terrace to look around. He spotted his Earth Directorate ship looking odd among the X-wings assembled there. If it weren't for the evidence of that ship--that it wasn't his old Ranger spacecraft--he would have a hard time believing he was not just now waking up from his incredible 500-year dream. Everyone in the 25th century he had met and come to know would have been merely a product of his imagination--Wilma, Dr. Huer--

\*BDBDBDBD\* Twiki's "voice", coming from the briefing room, interrupted Buck's thoughts.

"Of course this is the right briefing room, Twiki; we are early," Theo answered with the smug assurance of one who is chronically correct.



Buck smiled to himself. Twiki and Theopolis were very real evidence of his stay in the 25th century. He went back inside to join them. His eyes had just adjusted to the change in light when the others entered. He recognized the young princess and Wedge Antilles, the pilot who had brought him in, but the two older gentlemen were unknown to him. They were introduced as Commander Willard, in charge of base operations, and Commander Connery, intelligence.

Willard spoke first. "Well, Captain Rogers, I can't tell you how much confusion you've caused us since young Antilles first reported your appearance--one reason being we were in a state of confusion prior to your arrival." Everyone smiled politely, as expected, and he went on. "I understand your droids have explained our situation to you."

"Quite thoroughly, I've been told," answered Buck.

\*BDBDBD--ZZZZ\*

"Twiki, Dr. Farber did not find the explanation boring," Theo's sotto voce response was still audible to the others. They pretended to ignore it.

Commander Willard continued. "Our droid technicians have checked the logic processors of your friends, and in spite of the fantastic nature of the story they have told us, we must conclude it is true." Buck could have sworn he heard Theo sniff in disdain. "I think you understand the position you have put us in. We are in the process of removing our operations to another location--a difficult, complex, and time-consuming job at best--and yet we would like to help you regain the world that is rightly your own, and perhaps learn more about the forces involved in the process. Dr. Farber has a friend who might be able to help us in this, but we cannot be sure until we hear from her. Until then, we're at a loss as to how to handle you. Do you have any suggestions?"

Buck shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't have anything to offer that you don't already have. You've demonstrated your ability to fight with and without computers. Our technologies are at a comparable level; I can't give you any advantage in weaponry. I'm afraid the best I can do is wait quietly and stay out of trouble."

\*BDBDBD--SNICKER\*

Before Twiki could be admonished, Dr. Farber burst into the briefing room waving a slip of yellow paper. "They're already on the way. They'll be here tonight." All semblance of order disappeared as everyone crowded around her for more information. She made them resume their seats before she continued.

"As some of you may know, I went to school with Alka Forwyss--she was just Alka deLangue then, of course. We've kept in touch, although I will confess to being a rather poor correspondent. She and her husband have their own research station in the Lignaine system and have managed to keep a strict political neutrality in spite of receiving

several Imperial grants. I believe Alka suspects my current affiliation with the Alliance--"

Commander Connery cleared his throat; Dr. Farber merely looked at him as if to acknowledge his professional opinion and went on. "--but has not revealed her suspicions to anyone. When Captain Rogers' problem came up, I attempted to contact the Forwysses at their station but was informed they were away on a special project; the supervisor promised to relay the message to their research ship. I now have their answer." The twinkle in her eyes brightened. "Wouldn't you like to know what their special project was?"

"I'd like to know what's on that dispatch sheet you keep flipping about, young lady," Commander Willard said gruffly. Buck hid a smile at Dr. Farber's reactions to the words, since the "young lady" was only a few years the Commander's junior. However, the remark did have the desired effect; she read from the message.

"*'Cat's Cradle'*--that's the Forwyss ship--en route to Yavin system to investigate unusual patterns of energy release by local phenomena. Glad to help with your spatio-temporal refugee." That's Alka for you, always using technical language. She goes on to give arrival time and coordinates. To preserve our security and their neutrality, *Cat's Cradle* will orbit the planet in the vicinity of Yavin 2, which just happens to be the closest to the Death Star remains as well. Any further questions?"

She glanced at Commander Connery, who just happened to find something out on the terrace totally fascinating, and then at Commander Willard, who had failed to find anything equally as interesting on his side of the room and was obliged to acknowledge her report.

"Thank you, Dr. Farber. I trust you will act as liaison between your friends and Captain Rogers. I don't suppose I need remind you that you will be acting as a private citizen and not as a member of the Alliance. We will render what assistance we can, but I will not have this base or any of my people endangered by the presence of the research ship. Do you understand?"

"Completely," answered Dr. Farber.

Apparently satisfied with her answer, Commander Willard rose to leave. "You may have the use of this room to make whatever plans are necessary. Commander Connery?" The man in question turned to face him. "If you have completed your surveillance of the terrace, I believe we are expected at a staff meeting in the not too distant future."

Willard left the room as Connery was getting to his feet. The intelligence chief just shrugged and followed, stumbling as he rounded the corner but managing to catch himself on the table. He smiled sheepishly and went out the door.

The silence following this performance was broken by the princess. "Sometimes I just don't know about that man. He seems so competent at staff sessions, and his people did manage to get us the readouts of the Death Star, but then something like



this happens." She shook her head slowly.

Buck was leaning over from his chair and sighting along the table edge. "His name wouldn't happen to be Sean, would it?" he asked.

"What?"

"His first name. Is it Sean?" Buck had gotten up and was running his hand along the table where Connery had caught himself.

"No, it's James. Why?" Leia asked.

"Oh, something out of my culture; you wouldn't understand." Buck grinned and brought something out from under the table and placed it for all to see--a transmitter about the size of a thumbtack. "Planted as he was falling, I'll bet."

The others were staring dumbly, unwilling to believe their eyes. "Never underestimate a spook, particularly the head honcho. It's obvious he doesn't trust us completely. Any of you got anything to hide?" They shook their heads. "Then we'll just leave this where it is now to remind us to watch what we say behind anybody's back."

He walked back to his seat but did not sit down. Instead he looked out to the landing area and his ship. No doubt it was thoroughly bugged by now, too, and he would have a fine time trying to explain the--'additions' if, no, *when* he returned to Earth. He turned back to the briefing room. "Well, Dr. Farber, what's next on the agenda?"

"I really had nothing specific in mind, Captain Rogers," she replied. "I had thought that you alone should actually board *Cat's Cradle*. Should any later investigations be made, it would then appear that the Forwyssees found you themselves."

"Eminently logical, Dr. Farber. I could not have done better myself," Theopolis said. Buck grinned. Theopolis had been quiet far too long and was making up for lost time.

"That's quite a compliment, Dr. Farber," said Buck. "I hope you appreciate it."

"Oh, I do, Captain Rogers," she said, smiling. "Thank you, Theopolis."

"Do you have anything in mind for the rest of the time until your friends arrive?" Buck asked.

"No, your time is your own until then, but I *do* suggest you take a nap sometime after lunch." All of her bedside manner returned to her. "You still haven't recovered completely from your trip here. Remind me to give you your medical records for Alka. If possible, your return should be planned to minimize those effects."

\*BDBDBDBD--AMEN, SISTER\*

Dr. Farber chuckled. "Well, I'll leave you younger folks to yourselves. I'll be in touch

when *Cat's Cradle* arrives." She left the briefing room headed in the direction opposite that taken by Commanders Willard and Connery.

Wedge seemed to gain enough confidence to speak. "I'd like to have a closer look at your ship this afternoon, Captain Rogers, after your, uh, nap." He grinned at the thought of a 'grown man' taking an afternoon nap, and Buck grinned back.

"On the condition that I get a closer look at your ships." Buck leaned a little closer to the transmitter on the table. "At least, whatever the security people will allow."

"I have been given the basics on both X- and Y-wing fighters, Buck," interjected Theopolis. "You need not tire yourself examining them personally."

"Ah, but there's some things that just have to be experienced to be understood, and a pilot can't truly get the feel of a ship until he's sat in the cockpit and handled the controls. Right, Wedge?" The rebel pilot nodded, and Buck went on. "See you at the landing field at the third hour, okay?"

"Sure. See you then." The young man gave a nod in Leia's direction and sauntered out of the room.

"Seeing as how you will not be needing us until this evening," Theo said stiffly, "Twiki and I will be with R2D2 and C3PO, discussing human-mechanical relationships." Buck had the distinct impression he was being snubbed.

"You'll probably find them down on the hangar deck with Luke," said Leia.

"Thank you, Princess," the computer said formally. "Come, Twiki, let us go where we will be welcome." The drone headed for the door.

"Come down off your high horse, Theo," Buck said. "You know I didn't mean you weren't needed."

"Yes, Buck," Theo admitted, "but I *really* do have an engagement with R2D2--to play holochess."

"I thought as much. See you this evening, then."

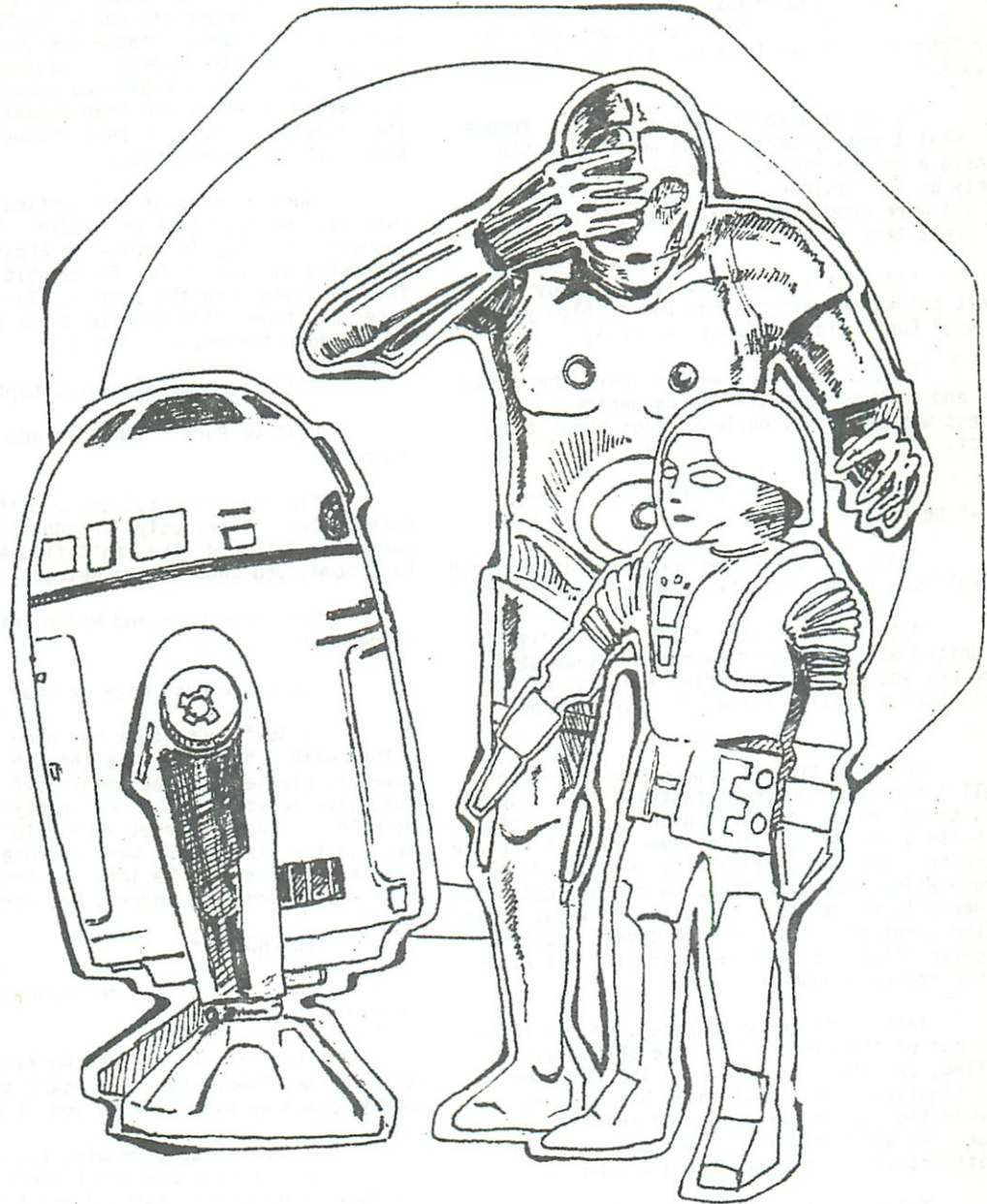
\*BDBDBD--DON'T DO ANYTHING I WOULDN'T DO\* floated down the corridor from the departing drone.

"That's the longest sentence I've heard him say," remarked Leia. "I didn't know he could talk that much."

"Only when he's trying to be a smartass," said Buck. "Most of the time it's just 'BDBDBD' and the rest of us have to guess what he's saying."

Leia sighed. "We have that problem with R2, but he can't speak any humanoid language at all. There're times when I think I understand his whistles and chirps--and then I take a stress pill and try to lie down. It means I'm working too







hard." She smiled at Buck, who returned the expression.

"What can I do for you, Princess? You must have a reason for staying behind, and it can't be that you want to look at my ship, too."

She shook her head. "Nothing as technical as that. I'd like to talk with you about your world, your people, how you live. When we finally get rid of the Empire, we're going to have to have something to replace it. I want to know about how your system works."

"You should probably talk to Theo about that. He's a member of the government, the Computer Council. He can give you all the details you want."

"I spoke with him while you were recovering. What I really want is the personal angle. You have a unique viewpoint, coming to Theo's society as an outsider. Also, I would like to find out more about the world you left behind, your first time."

"I'm not so sure you should study us. I don't think you want to know how to blow yourself up," Buck said, somewhat cynically.

"No, but perhaps we can learn the danger signs and work to keep it from happening." The princess was evidently quite serious about this subject.

"Well, this will probably take some time--" he hedged.

"Will you do me the honor of having lunch with me?" she countered. "We can talk until then."

Buck saw no other course but to give in. "The United States of America had a set-up similar to the one you people had during the days of the Republic--on a smaller scale, of course--" he began.

Leia practically pumped him dry of any and all information on the lifestyles he'd enjoyed in his times, eager to learn anything that might help build a freer, more just government to replace the Empire. She was particularly interested in the role Wilma played in the 25th century culture; like herself, Wilma had a place in the local administration, but also took on such diverse duties as fighter pilot and undercover agent. His afternoon nap had come none too soon.

Talking flying with Wedge, and climbing in and out of the various Alliance ships, was interesting, and the time sped by. The computer flight simulator was a challenge, but Buck was glad when the dinner call came and ended the session. An after-dinner nap was beginning to look attractive as evening rolled around.

Twiki and Theo joined him for dinner, Theo explaining in precise detail exactly how he had succeeded in defeating R2D2 at holochess. The computer explained everything he had learned from C3PO on the Forwysse and their exceptional scientific contributions. Theopolis was looking forward

to meeting them. Yes, yes, Buck admitted he was, also, but a nice little nap sounded like a better idea.

He had just reached the quarters assigned to him when a messenger found him with the news that the *Cat's Cradle* had just established orbit and would he please meet Dr. Farber in briefing room 3.

Dr. Farber sensed his fatigue immediately. "Just a little while longer, Captain Rogers, and you can rest aboard the *Cat's Cradle*." She handed him a set of tapes. "These are your medical records, along with records of observations we've made of the Death Star's explosion and aftereffects." She turned to where the transmitter still sat upon the tabletop. "They've been okayed by Commander Willard," she added loudly.

Buck grinned at the continuing joke. "I hope so," he said just as loudly. "I wouldn't want Commander Connery following me aboard ship and compromising himself." Dr. Farber bit her lip to keep from laughing into the pickup. Buck continued in a serious tone, "I'd like to thank you for everything you've done for me, Dr. Farber."

"It's been my pleasure, Captain Rogers."

"Call me Buck. I'm sure you know me well enough."

"Inside and out," she admitted, and they both smiled. "Seriously, though, Buck, if it happens that Keir and Alka can't find a way to get you back home, you know you're welcome with us."

"Princess Leia and Wedge both said the same thing earlier."

"Then you must know we mean it."

"I do." Buck took her hand. "If I should return with a headache like the one I started with, however, please keep the lights off a while longer. Just give me your hand." He gently kissed the one he held. "I never forget a knuckle." He turned away as the first faint wave of rose blushed Dr. Farber's cheeks. As he left the briefing room he heard Twiki and Theo address Dr. Farber.

\*BDBDBDBDBD\*

"Twiki and I wish to thank you, also," said Theo softly.

"And I thank you for the fine record you made for me, Theopolis. But now I think you'd better catch up with Buck or you'll be left behind."

The pair caught up with their companion as he was finishing his preflight check. "Get aboard, you two. PanYavin Airlines doesn't hold a flight for anybody." Buck lifted them into their seat in the rear of the cockpit and then climbed into his own.

As Rogers was preparing for take-off, Theo asked, "Do you know where you are going, Buck?"



"Wedge and I programmed the coordinates this afternoon," Buck answered. "I even flew it once in the simulator. Satisfied?" The last tech had cleared the area and the Earth ship took off. As soon as he was past the possibility of having to abort, the field lights went off and the rebel base virtually disappeared in the darkness. Yavin 4 was behind the planet and the base was on the side of the moon facing away from the primary, making it doubly dark. Yavin 2, however, was just entering the light of Yavin's star, and as he approached, Buck could make out the gleaming outline of *Cat's Cradle* off to one side.

"There it is, gang," he pointed it out to his passengers. "Our home away from home away from home." He resisted the urge to add another 'away from home'. For him, home was 25th century Chicago, and that was where he wanted to end up after all this.

In the meantime, this new "home" was definitely different. Evidently *Cat's Cradle* never entered the atmosphere: the jumbled collection of modules hung seemingly at random on a framework that resembled its namesake couldn't possibly take the stress. A shuttle system must be used, and it was toward the docking bay for such shuttles that he was headed. When he came within one kilometer, a tractor beam locked on and brought him the rest of the way.

No one was in the hangar bay when he landed, and after a brief period of indecision, Buck climbed out of the cockpit by himself. He freed Twiki and Theo and was helping them to the hangar deck when he saw a figure moving toward them from behind several panels of equipment.

"This way, Captain Rogers," the person waved, directing them to a hatch hidden behind other stacks of unidentifiable instruments. As they approached, the figure became a lab-coated woman in her early forties, sandy hair going gray at the temples, a pleasant dusting of freckles, and a warm smile that dispelled any doubts about their welcome.

"I'm sorry no one could be here when you landed, but we had to run decontamination on you and your ship before we could make contact." At Buck's puzzled look, she explained. "Oh, it's just a formality. If we had actually picked you up from space, we would have done so as part of our standard operating procedures, and the results would have been logged appropriately. We want all the loose ends covered, you understand."

They stepped into an area that could have passed for the corridor of any high-level office or apartment building. "Please forgive the confusion in the docking bay," the woman continued. "When we first set out, we weren't quite sure what we'd be investigating and had no idea what we'd need. Keir insisted on packing half the station on the off chance it might come in handy. You'll meet my husband tomorrow morning. We're just settling into sleep cycle, ship's time. How about you?"

"Sleep sounds like an excellent idea. It's night back at the--where I'm from, too," Buck acknowledged.

"Good. Here're your quarters. If you need anything, call. The intercom--" she indicated the instrument next to the bunk, "--will put you in touch with anywhere on the ship we're likely to be. Breakfast is whenever you want it. I'll show you how to program the galley tomorrow. All set?" Buck couldn't think of anything to ask, so he just nodded.

"I almost forgot. You have some tapes for me, don't you?" she asked.

"Twiki has them."

"Oh, that's great." She knelt down to Twiki's level. "You don't need any null program time to renew yourself, do you?"

Theopolis answered politely. "No, both of us are set for continuous operation. Thank you for inquiring."

"Think nothing of it," she replied, rising to her feet again. "We've come across so many different ways of dealing with mechanicals, it's almost funny. Some cultures require their droids to sleep when the organics do--maybe they don't trust them, I don't know. Others want to 'get their money's worth' out of them, like an investment in equipment, and so don't want the droids wasting a minute.

"Well, enough about that. I want you to meet Gogi, our research computer, and give her the tapes. While we poor organic types catch up with our biological shortcomings, you can discuss the problem at hand."

At the end of this monologue, Dr. Forwyss succeeded in hustling Twiki and Theopolis out of Buck's cabin and headed them down the corridor. "Why, I'll bet you have the theoretical aspects figured out before we have our first cup of tea--" The voice faded, as if they had turned a corner.

Buck shook his head and got ready for bed. According to what Theo had told him, that woman had won the equivalent of several Nobel prizes, both alone and in cooperation with her husband. If his past experiences hadn't broken him of the habit of stereotyping people, he would never have believed it possible that the renowned Dr. Alka Forwyss and the informal chatterbox that had met him were the same individual.

The Earthman woke to a lively rendition of "Reveille" played over the intercom. *Now that's something I haven't heard in a long time*, he groaned inwardly, wondering how this ship, in this galaxy, in this time, had gotten hold of the music. *Two guesses*, he thought, *and they both start with 'T'*. He rolled over to confront the suspects. "All right," he said, "Whose bright idea was this?"

Theo answered. "Gogi wanted to know what you preferred to wake you. I suggested the tune,



based on your background. It was effective, was it not?"

"Quite. But what choice did I have?"

The bugle was replaced with the steady noise of water dripping. The sound continued for several seconds until Buck's patience wore thin and he yelled, "Shut it off!" The dripping ceased immediately.

"That is Dr. A's wake up," said Theo. "It, too, is an effective alarm, Gogi says Dr. A has never slept through more than two minutes of it."

"I can see why. Well, since I'm awake, I might as well get up. Do you know if either of the Doctors Forwyss is up? I was promised a lesson in food programming."

"That's not necessary," said a soft, feminine voice from the intercom. "Just tell me what you want and I will program the processor." Buck looked to Theo for explanation.

"Dr. A does not know it, but Dr. K programmed Gogi to take over any and all computer functions on board *Cat's Cradle* that she wishes. Gogi has not informed Dr. A of this because Dr. A takes pride in her cooking. For you however, she is willing to program the processor."

"How does ham and eggs sound, Captain Rogers, with toast and honey and--what was that beverage, Theo?"

"Coffee. Captain Rogers takes it black."

"Thank you, Theo, dear--toast and honey, and a pot of black coffee. Shall I have that waiting for you in the galley?"

"That sounds fantastic, Gogi. Can you, uh, concentrate elsewhere for a while? I'd like to have a few words with my friends."

"Certainly, Captain Rogers. I will see you in the galley. Theo knows the way." A faint click was heard from the intercom speaker, an audible indication that the ship's computer had complied with his request.

"'Theo, dear'?" Buck asked the computer in front of him. "Just what were you up to last night?"

\*BDBDBD--THEO'S IN LOVE\*

"Twiki, I shall personally see to your deprogramming when we reach Earth, if you do not retract that remark immediately," Theopolis said, heatedly.

"Cool it, you two. Your personal affairs are your own business, Theo, and neither Twiki nor I have any right to make fun of them. Right, Twiki?"

\*BDBD--RIGHT\* a somewhat subdued drone replied.

"Okay. Have you calmed down now, Theo?"

"Yes, Buck. I do admit I enjoy working with Gogi. Dr. K developed her basic design and programming, and incorporated a great deal of Dr. A into the subconscious levels, I believe. I find it a pleasant difference from the personalities developed by my colleagues on the Computer Council."

"Vive la difference," Buck agreed. "Now what about our original problem? What have you been able to work out so far?"

"I am sorry I neglected to mention it earlier. We will be departing this afternoon. Gogi and I have taken care of everything except the specific details of preventing a recurrence of the aftereffects. Dr. K is working on that now."

"That simple?" Buck looked doubtfully at his metal companions and began to dress for breakfast, knowing Theopolis could not resist an opportunity to lecture. He was right.

"It appears from preliminary observations and our own experience that the destruction of the Death Star created an unprogrammed star gate from our space-time continuum to this one. Gogi had never dealt with the concept of star gates except as a purely theoretical idea, as we have never truly explored the possibilities of hyperspace travel because the star gates work so well for us--"

"--the Alliance has agreed to detonate a another proton torpedo at the site of the Death Star remains in order to raise the ambient energy to its previous level. When the readouts match observations made prior to our arrival, we go. It is really quite simple, although the mathematics involved are somewhat esoteric. How was your breakfast, Buck?" Theopolis changed the subject abruptly.

"Great. My compliments to the chef." "Thank you, Captain Rogers," said Gogi. "I've explained our processing system to Theo. Perhaps when you get back he will convert your kitchen unit so you won't be forced to eat those dull concentrates he says all other Earth people eat."

"I'm much obliged to you, Gogi."

"Think nothing of it. Twiki and I swapped a few recipes he said he learned from you. I can't wait to try pepperoni and mushroom pizza when Aithne gets back, and I think Dr. K would enjoy chow mein--"

"Did I just hear my name mentioned?" asked the rusty-haired man who stuck his head into the galley. "Hi, Captain Rogers, are you corrupting my computer, or has she vamped yours yet?" If Alka Forwyss projected a slightly maternal image, here was the young boy grown tall to go with it.

"I think we're about even on both counts," Buck said, taking an immediate liking to this man. "You're getting pizza and chow mein--"

"And tacos," interjected Gogi.







"--and tacos, and I get a computer who's smitten with your computer's intuition."

"She does have a nice set of peripherals," Theo said unselfconsciously, then his expression lights took on a definite pink tinge as he seemed to realize what he had said.

"You're right, Captain Rogers," agreed Keir Forwyss, "we're even. What I've come to discuss, however, is how you are going to experience the return to your own time and space. From what we've been able to determine, your nervous system received so much input as you were passing through each, shall we say, 'plane', that it was unable to assimilate all the information and went into an overload state.

"Fortunately, you were able to land your ship before the condition went max on you, but from what Theo tells me, your exit point will be rather distant from any base and you will be flying into an uncertain situation when you return. Of course, the cybercircuits in your friends here suffer the same overload, but handle it differently, being equipped with circuit breakers, as it were.

"What I propose doing is slowing your internal time sense so you can handle the rapidly changing input. We can do it hypnotically and set up a framework in which you can deal with the radically different impressions you will be experiencing. What do you think?"

"It sounds okay to me. I'd just rather not repeat the first episode, if you please."

"I'm afraid much of it will seem like a dream. I know you spent about five hundred years in that state, but this will only be a couple of hours, subjective time. Objectively, of course, you'll be through in no time at all--literally. I'm getting the details of a possible framework situation from someone, uh, on another moon." Dr. Forwyss smiled briefly at the small evasion, then continued. "Until then, however, we've got to take holograms and make observations on your ship for our records. I think it's a waste of time, but it might justify funding later, so we can't put it off, can we?"

The rest of the morning was spent in holography and recording sessions. Buck, Theopolis, and Twiki gave carefully edited accounts of their "experiences", neglecting to mention their earlier stopover and not being questioned about it. The records Buck had brought from the rebel base were evaluated for conflict and carefully interpreted to appear to have come from a remote pick up in another system.

Theopolis was given an on-the-spot medical degree and Buck's medical records were attributed to him instead of Dr. Farber. By the time the afternoon rolled around, all the documentation had been taken care of. Even the Alliance's proton torpedo was to be listed as 'undetoned ordnance found in situ'.

Both Drs. Forwyss were deck to see them off. "Your framework and hypnotic instructions will be provided by the, uh, torpedo detonator. I believe you've met the young man. He's going to put you in the Mos Eisley cantina--there'll be aliens enough there to indentify your planar impressions with," said Dr. K.

"Just be careful, Buck," admonished Dr. A. "That place is a real dive."

"Why, my dear," exclaimed Dr. K in mock surprise, "how would you know?"

"I have my sources," was all she would say, but Buck saw the smile pulling at the corners of her mouth.

Twiki and Theopolis were already in their place as he climbed into the cockpit. "I am glad you could join us," said Theo. "PanYavin Airlines does not hold up a flight for anybody," he quoted.

"That does it," Buck said, throwing his arms up in defeat. Next time you guys are flying yourselves wherever it is you want to go." He settled back to the business of getting his ship to the rendezvous point, waving to the Forwysses at their instrumentation panels as he passed.

The rebel pilot was none other than the blond kid, Luke Skywalker. As he described the cantina, Buck saw a picture of it solidify in his mind. It seemed as though there was a slight tickling sensation in his brain--probably the hypnotic suggestion taking place.

"Okay, Buck, you ought to have it by now. Let's get you home." Skywalker shot past in his X-wing. The target area was dead ahead.

In spite of the cockpit shielding, the detonation of the proton torpedo nearly blinded Buck. As his sight was returning, he heard a voice on the comset. "May the Force be with you." Then he was plunging toward the heart of the great blossom of energy that was expanding toward him, incredible colors again filling the space around him, pulsing with the very heartbeat of the galaxy.

It took a minute for Buck's eyes to adjust to the dimness of the cantina. From the entryway he could see it was every bit as motley as Luke had described. There were one-eyed creatures and thousand-eyed, scaled, furred, and feathered. A band was playing in the background, almost drowned out by the gabble of strange tongues. In the back of his mind he knew the alien shapes and sounds were merely analog devices to enable his nervous system to handle the myriad impressions of interplanar travel without overloading. Nevertheless, right now they seemed very real, and he felt somewhat conspicuous just standing at the entrance.



Buck stepped down into the main room, looking for some place to sit quietly and observe. He spotted another human in one of the alcoves, a medium-sized young man with dark, curly hair and a beard. The light from the table lamp reflected from his dark-rimmed glasses and gave a slightly sinister look to the otherwise pleasant face. He looked up as Buck began moving in his direction and invited him over with a wave.

"Here, have a seat," he said. "It's great to see someone from home in a place like this. Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Thanks, whatever you're having will be fine," Buck said.

The young man caught the bartender's attention and held up his cup, then turned to his new companion. "It's a reasonable imitation of beer--with a shot of rum mixed in for good measure. How'd you find this place?"

Buck laughed. "To be honest, I'm not really sure I'm here at all. An acquaintance described it for me, but there's a long story involved in how I got here."

Buck's drink arrived and his companion pulled some coins out of his jeans pocket and put them on the table. "This one's on me. I'd like to hear this long story of yours. Don't worry about the time; I've got all night."

Buck looked curiously at his host, then decided it must be his distorted time sense; he launched into an account of the happenings of the last few days. Now and then he would be questioned on some of the details of his observations--the young man was particularly interested in the history of the rebellion Theo had given him--and then allowed to continue. His drink had been refilled twice by the end of the tale, as he explained how the cantina was supposed to provide a more acceptable method of dealing with the rush of sensory input.

"Yeah, this place is full of wierdies, all right," agreed the other. "But what do you think the Alliance will do next? What could you see before you left?"

"Well, they had mentioned something about moving their base; they didn't tell me where--security restrictions, I suppose, although I wouldn't know where it was anyway--but they're setting up whatever defensive equipment they can lay their hands on. I guess they figure it's just a matter of time before the Empire strikes back."

The young man nodded thoughtfully and took a sip of his drink.

"Turnabout's only fair," said Buck after taking a drink of his own. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for an idea for a movie," the other grinned, "and I think you've just given it to me."

"Which one? Astronaut plays Rip Van Winkle for five hundred years, or desperate rebels destroy the Empire's biggest threat?" Buck asked.

"I'm afraid there is already a Buck Rogers in my universe--"

"There is?"

"Uh huh. A World War I veteran trapped in a mine cave-in in the late twenties was preserved by the radioactive gases present. His given name was Anthony, though."

"I see." William Anthony Rogers felt strangely disturbed at the thought of another person with his name having parallel experiences in another universe. He changed the subject. "How did you get here?"

"I'm dreaming, I guess. Something like this happened before my last movie. I had been working pretty hard on developing a story, and one night I went to bed and dreamed about meeting a bunch of kids down at Mel's Drive-In and talking about cruisin' and music and stuff like that. When I woke up it seemed like an interesting idea, so I made a film about it, a low-budget number that clicked at the box-office. Lately I've been thinking about another picture, and I guess my subconscious threw me here to work out the details."

"Well, I wish you luck," Buck said, "but I think it's time I left this place. I feel as though the sand people are conducting bantha maneuvers along my spine." He rose to go.

"Then, as Luke Skywalker said, 'May the Force be with you'."

"And with you, too, for what it's worth."

Buck reached the steps as the squad of stormtroopers pushed their way into the cantina. Looking back to the alcove to warn his friend, he saw the table was empty. *Perhaps his alarm just went off*, Buck thought, hiding behind a rather large drunken alien as the whiteshells clattered down the steps, *just like mine*.

In spite of the hours Buck felt he had spent inside the cantina, it was still bright outside, blinding him momentarily. When his eyes adjusted, he was almost surprised to see the controls of his fighter in front of him rather than the streets of Mos Eisley, then he remembered what had happened. After several minutes had passed, Theo came around.

"Are we back yet, Buck?" he asked.

"I think so," the pilot answered. "The coordinates all match up, and, if I'm not mistaken, Colonel Deering has just joined us from her patrol sector."

"Just what do you think you're doing out of your area, Buck Rogers," sizzled over the speaker. "It would have served you right if the pirates had caught you."



\*BDBDBD--SOUNDS LIKE WILMA\*

"Well, Captain Rogers," said Colonel

Deering, "I'm waiting for an explanation."

"This may be hard for you to believe, Wilma, but a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..."



EDITORS' NOTES: Good news for "Buck Rogers" fans--the show has been picked up for next season, and will be shown on Saturday evenings at 8:00pm. To quote our favorite drone, \*BDBD--RIGHT ON, BUCK AND WILMA!



THE ADVENTURES OF  
**CHRIS SHERIDAN**



**H IS  
FOR HOSTAGE...  
AND HAZARDMAN**

Patrick Daniel O'Neill



## chapter 1

DAILY NEWS. Tuesday, March 6, 1979. Public Notice:

"Crooner seeks meeting with owner of Circle 'H' Ranch at northwest corner of Lookout Point. Today, 7:00 PM.

Chris Sheridan surreptitiously checked his watch. Going on noon. He still had to tape today's show, break for lunch, and run through a rehearsal for tomorrow's taping. He calculated the time needed, nodded. He should just be able to--

"Chris, you're wanted on stage."

Chris carefully folded his paper and set it on his chair. He strolled to the lighted area of the studio and took his place on the set.

He glanced at the floor manager. "Thirty seconds 'til tape, Chris." He reviewed his opening line, silently. "Speed." He cleared his throat. "5-4-3-2-1-Go!" Another episode of *Markham's Family* had begun.

Chris left the studio an hour later. When he reached the lobby of ABC's main programming complex, Caroline McAllister was waiting for him. As she studied the traffic through the window, he walked up behind her. "Hello, beautiful," he greeted her.

She spun at the sound of his voice, her long red-brown hair swinging with the motion, her dark-green dress swirling gently about her legs. Her dark eyes flashed as she returned his greeting. "Hello yourself, handsome. Ready for some lunch?" She took his hand and they left by the Fifty-third Street exit.

The March wind blew Chris's thick, sandy-colored hair into his eyes, and he brushed it back impatiently. "Where should we go?"

"Brew Burger?" she suggested, and he quickly agreed.

After lunch, Chris walked Caroline back to the IRT subway station so she could take the Seventh Avenue Express back to her apartment in Brooklyn Heights. "Any plans for tonight?" he asked her.

"Nothing special. Why?"

"After rehearsal this afternoon I have an appointment with a certain man in blue."

"Crosby?"

"Right. There's a notice in the *News* this morning."

"Okay. I'll wait up for you."

They kissed by the token booth, not really saying goodbye until the train roared into the station. And even then, Chris stood and watched the train pull out.

By three o'clock, Chris was back in the studio, rehearsing for the next day's taping. They broke again at six, and Chris retired to his dressing room. There he stripped down to his underwear, and pulled a special set of clothes from a hidden compartment in his wardrobe closet.

He pulled a blue turtleneck over his head and struggled into a tight pair of black slacks. He zipped up an asymmetrically fastened maroon jacket with a strange symbol embellished on the left breast. Then he struggled on with a pair of knee-high black boots. He checked himself out in the mirror, nodded. *Fine so far*, he thought. *Now the final touch*. He sprayed his hair with a special preparation that turned it a deep black. Together with the heavy black mask he tied over his eyes, it was an effective disguise.

The emblem over his heart on the jacket, a circumscribed 'H' superimposed by an infinity sign, proclaimed this new identity. Chris Sheridan had become the Hazardman!

He cautiously opened the door, moved down the corridor to the fire stairs, and ran up to the roof. There, the masked man drew a thin nylon cord from his belt and attached a collapsible grappling hook to one end. Swinging it over his head, he threw it across the street and launched himself into space.

He landed on the building on the south side of Fifty-third Street. He rewound the grappling line and began to move south along the roof-tops and ledges of Sixth Avenue. At Thirty-fifth Street he caught the line on the statue in Herald Square and used it as a stepping stone across the wide intersection of Sixth and Broadway. He bounced easily along the north side of Thirty-fourth until he reached the corner of Fifth Avenue.

Across from him stood what was still the most famous building in the world, though it was now but the third tallest--the Empire State Building. He looked up at it: its upper stories and transmitting tower were lit a bright green in honor of the approaching St. Patrick's Day.

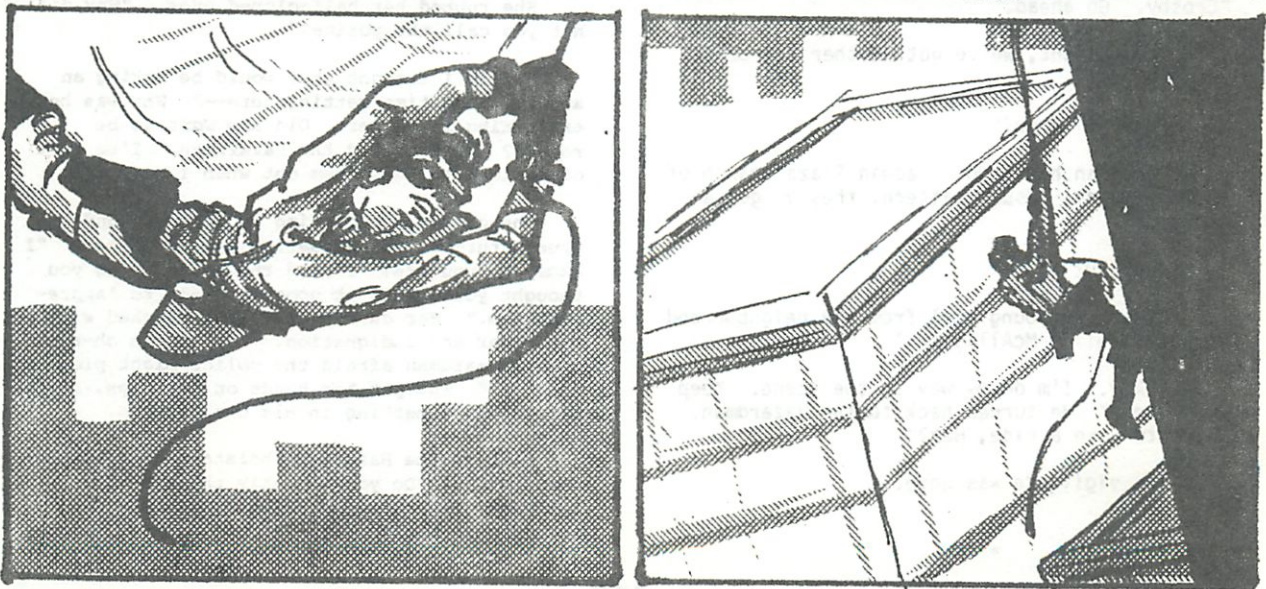
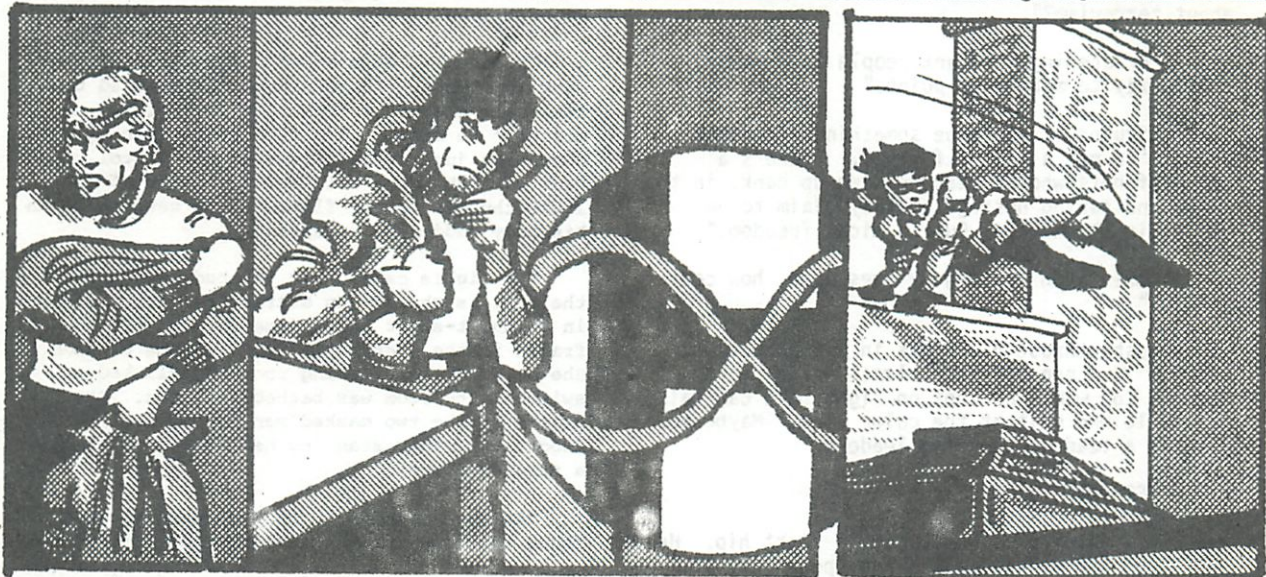
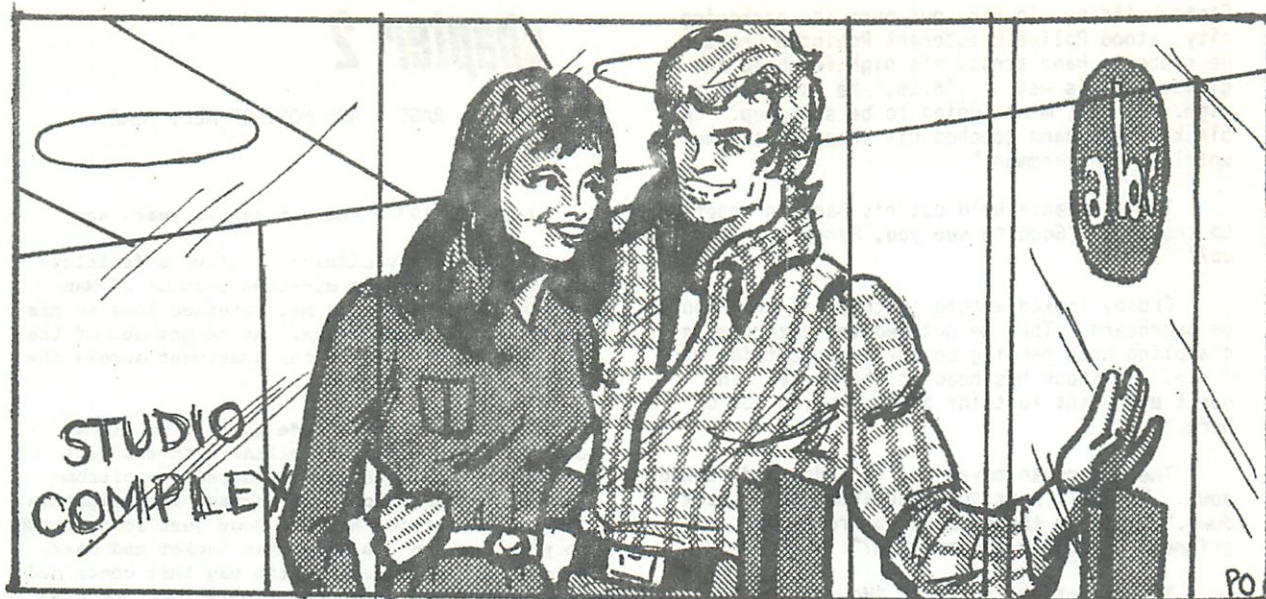
The building the Hazardman stood upon was a mere fifteen stories high. "I must be crazy," he muttered.

He swung the grappling hook to the first recess on the Empire State, at the twenty-fifth floor level. He swung across and began to climb hand-over-hand up the north face of the building.

\*

On the northwest corner of the observation deck at the eighty-sixth floor of the Empire







State Building, looking out over the darkening city, stood Police Lieutenant Robinson Crosby. He rubbed a hand across his high forehead and glanced at his watch. "6:59," he said with a sigh. "Hope I'm not going to be stood up." A black-gloved hand touched his shoulder and he whirled. "Hazardman!"

The vigilante held out his hand in greeting to the cop. "Good to see you, Bingo. What's up?"

Crosby looked around to check if they could be overheard. Then he noticed the Hazardman's grappling hook hanging on the ledge outside the fence. He shook his head at the masked man. "I don't even want to think about how you got up here."

The Hazardman moved to the ledge and looked down. "I don't want to think about going back down." Then he turned back to Crosby and grinned. "So, why the meeting?"

The detective frowned. "How do you feel about terrorism?"

"Threatening innocent people is a lousy, stupid way to make your point."

"Figured it would be something like that. Well, I've got a killer for you. There's a group of nuts who've been holding up banks in the city, and taking hostages. They claim to be acting in the name of Puerto Rican freedom."

"Other than keeping my eyes open, how can I help?"

Crosby thrust his hands in his pocket and paced. "You can get into places in this city where a cop would be shot on sight, and can talk to people who spit at the color blue. Maybe you can get a lead on the ring leaders."

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

The sound came from Crosby's right hip. He unsnapped his walkie-talkie and spoke into it. "Crosby. Go ahead."

"Lieutenant, we've got another terrorist hold-up."

"Where? When?"

"Half an hour ago. Cadman Plaza branch of the Chem Bank. Usual pattern, they've got a hostage."

"Any ID?"

"Yeah. A young girl from the neighborhood. Name's Caroline McAllister."

"Okay. I'm on my way to the scene. Keep me posted." He turned back to the Hazardman. "Want to take a ride, Haz?"

The vigilante was gone.

## chapter 2

ANGER. RAGE. AND MOST OF ALL, FEAR...

June 16, 1977. Less than two years ago.

It was nearly midnight. After a fruitless night patrolling the mid-town section of Manhattan, Chris Sheridan had returned home to his apartment at Cadma Plaza. As he got out of the elevator he glanced at the apartment across the hall.

"Odd. The door's wide open... no lights on." Though he was unfamiliar with the girl who lived there, Chris considered the circumstances unusual enough to warrant investigation. He stopped outside his own door just long enough to pull back on his Hazardman jacket and mask. He reached into the athletic bag that contained the rest of his equipment and got out the disruptor pistol.

Cautiously, he stepped inside the girl's dark apartment. As he did so, he spotted the tell-tale glow of a flashlight. "Hold it, mister!" he cried. The flashlight turned in his direction just as he triggered the pistol. The beam of light went wild as the holder of the light thudded to the floor, every nerve path in his body suddenly disrupted.

The lights came on in the bedroom. "What the hell is this?" An attractive girl dressed in a long t-shirt and pajama bottoms stood framed in the light spilling from the bedroom. She came into the living room and flicked a switch. The room was bathed in light. She stared at the two masked men--one lying on the floor, the other standing near the door, holding a strange pistol.

"Excuse me, miss," the Hazardman began, "I found this character searching your apartment--"

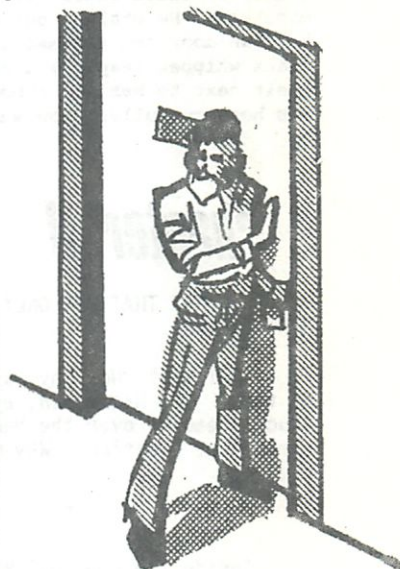
She rubbed her half-closed eyes. "Why didn't you call the police?"

"Well, I thought they would be taking an awfully long time getting here--" Why was he explaining it to her. Did she want to be robbed? "I'm called the Hazardman. I've sort of decided to help them out when I can."

The girl was beginning to wake up, and the true nature of the situation dawned on her. "I know who you are! I read the papers. So you thought you'd take it upon yourself to 'apprehend him.' Her dark eyes fairly flashed with her anger and indignation. "Or is the oh-so-great Hazardman afraid the police might pick him up, too?" She put her hands on her hips, daring him to say something in his own defense.

Calmly, the Hazardman holstered the disruptor pistol. "Do you honestly think I do this for fun? That somehow I get my kicks out of spending my nights fighting the scum of humanity? You'll have to forgive me, miss. I'm







going out for some fresh air." He turned to the open door. She lunged after him and grabbed his arm before he could leave.

"Hold it. I knew you seemed familiar. You live across the hall!" She pulled him around so that he faced her.

The Hazardman pulled his arm from her grasp and turned again to go. "You must be mistaken."

She stepped into his path. "No, I'm not. You live across the hall!" She reached up and grabbed the back of his mask, pulling it loose. She stared into his black eyes. "This thing," she said, indicating the mask in her hand, "and the black hair make a pretty good disguise...but not good enough to fool anyone who's seen you before."

The unmasked Hazardman scowled, and grabbed his mask from her hand, "Goodnight, miss. Oh, and I suggest you get the police here before my disruptor blast wears off. You've got thirty minutes." He stalked out of the apartment to his own door and slammed it behind him. His black whippet leaped and barked around him. He knelt next to her and rubbed her back, shaking his head ruefully. Now what?

## chapter 3

...FEAR THAT HIS ONLY REAL FRIEND WAS IN MORTAL PERIL.

"Friend." Now why was it he thought of her as that? The Hazardman, by now crouched atop a truck speeding over the Manhattan Bridge, pondered that question. Why merely 'friend'?

\*

Inside the Chemical Bank at Cadman Plaza, Caroline McAllister used every bit of her strength and courage to stay calm. She was not at all sure of the sanity of her two captors, and knew panic could dangerously incite them.

"Hey, Bull!" The one near the window, a wiry, hyper-kinetic type with wild blonde hair, called to his partner. "There's another pig-mobile pulling up out front."

Both men were armed and dressed the same. They carried Browning Automatic Rifles and wore ragged jeans and t-shirts topped by old fatigue jackets. Each also had a small automatic pistol shoved in the belt of his pants. The one called Bull moved to his partner's side. "Yeah, I see it, Ribs. Looks like the plain-clothes boys have made the scene."

They had entered the bank at about 6:30 PM, just as the staff was beginning to close down operations from their evening hours. Caroline was one of about five customers in the place. Only one officer, two tellers, and a guard had

been working. Ribs had grabbed Caroline by the arm and had dragged her to a chair. When she'd tried to break free, he'd cuffed her in the mouth and had shoved her onto the chair. He'd pulled out two lengths of rope and had proceeded to tie her to the chair--tightly and thoroughly.

Meanwhile, although no one else offered any fight, Bull pulled out his BAR and raked it around the bank. When he was done there were but three living beings in the bank--Ribs, Bull, and Caroline.

Now Caroline tried to shift her position in her chair, straining to see what they were talking about. Spying her out of the corner of his eye, Bull spun around and gestured menacingly with his rifle. "Just stay in the chair, sweetcakes."

Bull was aptly named. Weighing roughly 270 pounds, the burly, bearded black man was nearly six-and-a-half feet tall.

Caroline shrank back into the seat. She counted Bull's reaction as another point for his total lack of sanity. Her hands were bound behind her back and she was lashed to the chair. Her legs were tied at the ankles. There was very little she could have done to them.

"Okay, Chris," she muttered. "Where the hell are you when I *really* need you?"

"What was that, sweetcakes?" Bull's basso profundo broke her reverie. He glared at her, waiting for an answer.

"Oh, nothing. Just wondering what a friend would be doing about now."

At the window, Ribs giggled manically. "I wouldn't worry about my friends, if I was you. I'd worry about me." His body quivered as he giggled again, but the rifle never lost its aim. Caroline watched him and shivered.

\*

Outside, her 'friend' was on the rooftop across the street. His black eyes narrowed as he watched the shadows moving inside the bank, and his jaw tightened as he clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering.

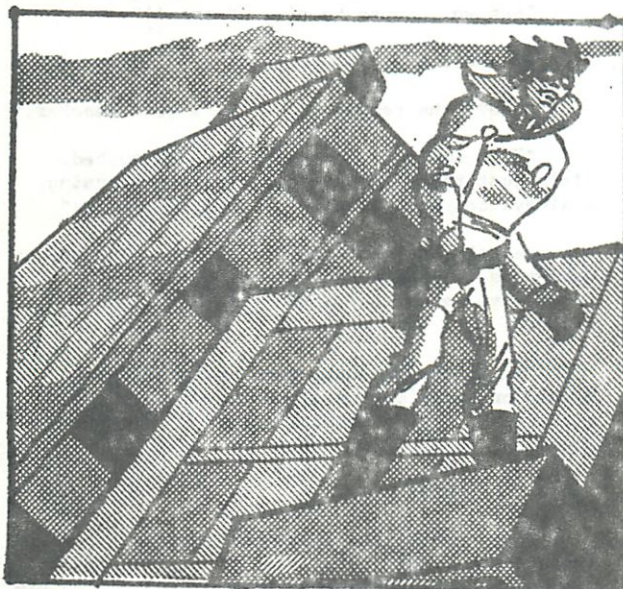
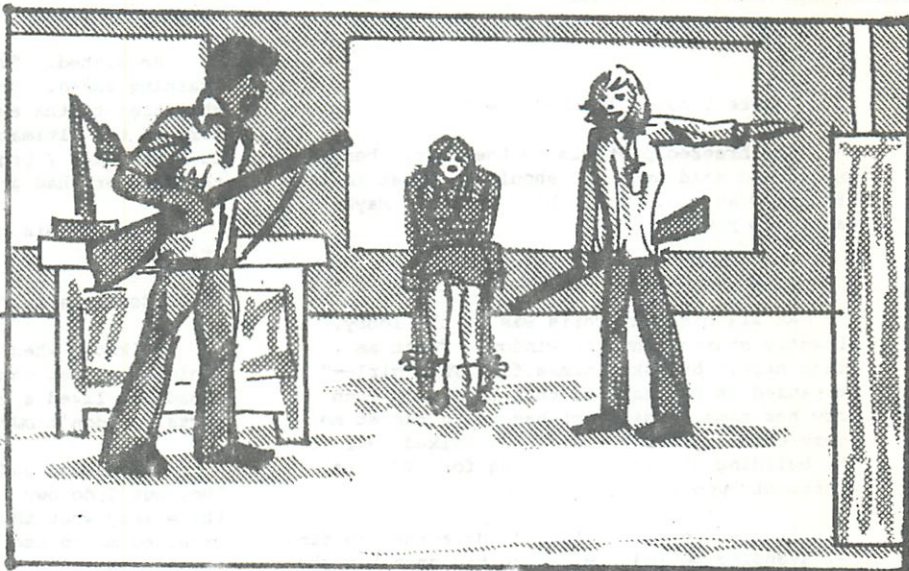
"Shit! I've faced gunmen before. Why do these scare me?" He brushed his hand through his artificially blackened hair. "Because they're mad as hatters, and they've got Caroline. That's why, dummy!"

He dropped to the street level and circled to his left, avoiding the massed police cars and surveying the situation. He still hadn't resolved the question of why he thought of Caroline as a 'friend.'

He pushed the question to the back of his mind. "Get her out of there--then worry about what you call her."

\*







## chapter 4

FRIEND. WHY NOT 'GIRLFRIEND'? WHY NOT...

The morning after the burglary, a Saturday, Chris was in the laundry room in the basement of his apartment building when the girl entered. She strolled past him, grinning. "Good morning, masked man." He glared at her.

She unloaded her clothes from a washer two down from the one he was using. He walked over and, pretending to help her, whispered, "Why don't you just call the networks with your 'bulletin'?"

She turned and smiled at him--an honest, engaging, intriguing smile. He frowned in return.

"Don't you ever smile?" she asked with a laugh.

"Maybe I never learned how."

She breezed past him to the door, then turned and said over her shoulder, "Meet me in the lobby at six. We'll have dinner. Maybe I can teach you."

At six o'clock, Chris was in the lobby, absently staring out the window. "What am I doing here," he asked himself. "This girl--" he paused as he realized that he didn't even know her name, "this girl has poked fun at me every chance she's gotten." He walked over to the building directory, looking for 17C, the apartment opposite his.

"Forget where you live?" He turned to find her standing behind him, as he had seen her the night before, hands on hips. Just one thing had changed--she was smiling now.

"Just looking to see who I was having dinner with."

She held out her hand. "Caroline McAllister...and you're Christopher Sheridan." He cocked his head to one side. She grinned again. "I already checked to see who I'd invited to dinner."

They went to a local Chinese restaurant. Over dessert, she finally got to her point. "Why do you do it?"

He sipped his tea, and answered, "You wouldn't believe me."

She smiled again. "Try me."

"Okay." He poured more tea for them both. "It's a promise I made to some very important people...uh, beings. They're not exactly human." He watched Caroline's brows knit in confusion.

"I told you you wouldn't believe me."

"Please, go on."

"All right, but a lot of this early stuff I have only second hand."

"My mother died giving me birth, apparently under some really horrendous conditions. The natives of a distant planet, called Crea, were observing the situation, and, although it was too late to help my mother, they rescued me and took me back to their planet. I was raised and trained there, on Crea."

"I don't know if the Crean race have a name for themselves; I always called them the 'Teachers'. The one in charge of my training was called Tar-myk. He was my father, my high school principal, my best friend, all rolled into one."

Caroline sat with her chin in her hands, entranced by Chris's tale. "You said something about a promise?"

He sighed. "Yes. Not very long ago, my training ended. The Teachers had pushed all my abilities to the ends of human capabilities. I'm sort of the ultimate human. They sent me back to Earth, and I promised to aid mankind with what the Teachers had given me."

She took his hand across the table. "That's it, huh?"

"Essentially."

"Y'know, when you arrived on Earth, you could have just chucked the whole thing--gone ahead and lived a perfectly normal life. You certainly don't owe this planet anything."

They stood and he helped her with her coat. "No, but I do owe the Teachers. How could I throw away what they had taught me, what they expected me to use to benefit my fellow humans?"

"But why choose to play 'Batman'?"

He smiled.

"See?" she responded. "I'm a good teacher."

"Your smile is contagious." He laughed. "It's just that I found your reference amusing. I always compared myself to Captain America."

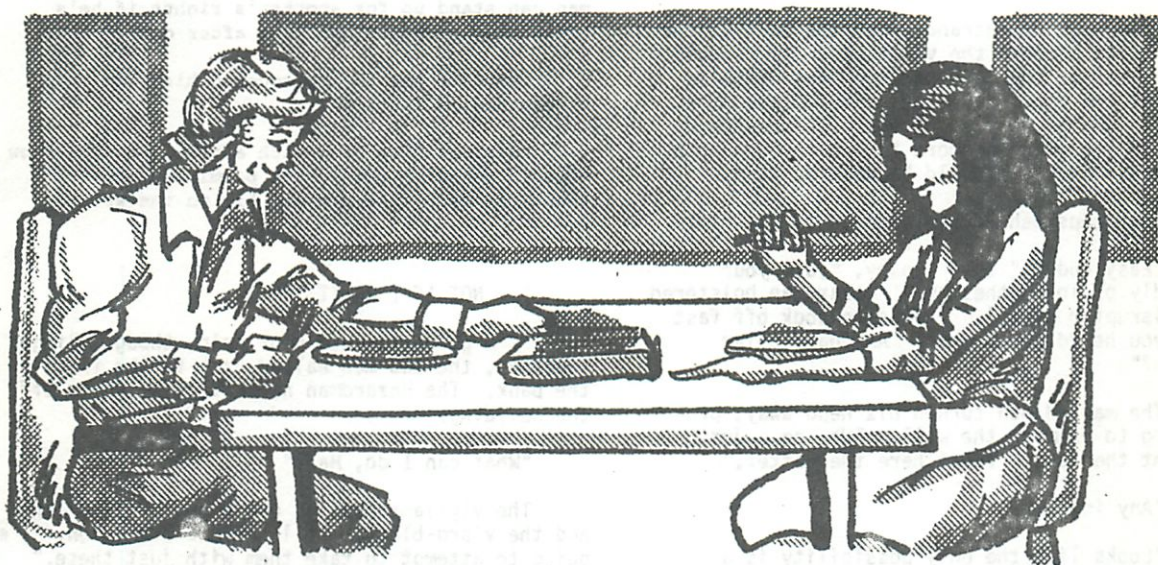
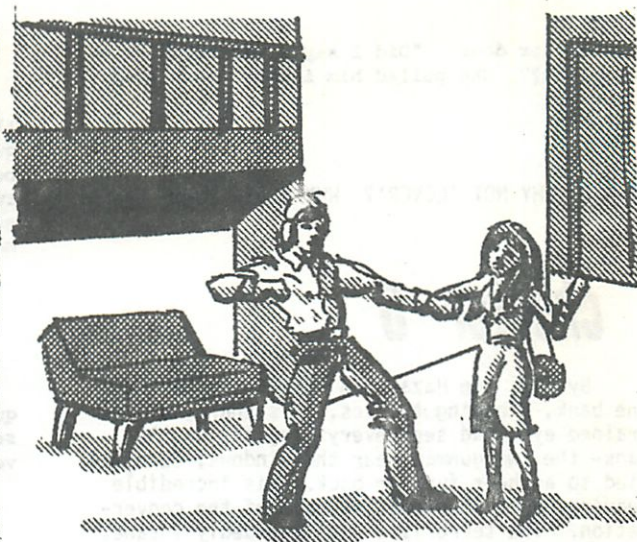
He held the door for her and they turned toward home. "That's another thing," she said. "How do you even know about that comic book stuff?"

"Well, the Teachers gave me a full background on Earth cultures, including popular culture. I took a special interest in comic books."

"You would."

They entered the apartment building. At the seventeenth floor, he started to turn toward his own door. She hung on to his hand and pulled him







over to her door. "Did I say I was ready to say goodnight?" She pulled him inside and closed the door.

...WHY NOT 'LOVER'? WHY NOT?

## chapter 5

By now, the Hazardman was at the back of the bank, debating tactics. His sharp, alien-trained eyes had seen everything inside the bank--the two gunmen near the windows, Caroline tied to a chair further back. His incredible hearing had even picked up part of the conversation. The terrorists were decidedly insane, but Caroline was holding up well. He certainly knew how to pick his friends. *Damn, there's that word again!* he thought.

There was no entrance from the back of the bank. That's where the vault was: six inches of concrete at the wall and two feet of solid steel at the door. Even the vibro-blade, the energy knife he carried in his boot-sheath, would take an hour or more to cut through both barriers. Caroline could be dead by then.

Footsteps behind him caused him to whirl.

"Easy buddy," said Crosby, "just your friendly plain-clothesman." Hazardman holstered his disruptor pistol. "You sure took off fast when you heard about this. Any particular reason?"

The masked man turned his head away, pretending to examine the wall. "Uh, no. Just thought the sooner I got here the better."

"Any ideas?"

"Looks like the only possibility is a frontal assault."

"Could get that girl killed."

The Hazardman grimaced. "Not if I do it."

"COULD GET THAT GIRL KILLED..."

Sunday morning, Chris and Caroline crossed the hall to have breakfast in his apartment. They were greeted at the door by the barking black whippet. "Easy, Blaise. Down girl." He knelt and rubbed her behind the ears.

Caroline joined in the show of affection. "Blaise?"

"Modesty Blaise," he answered. "She's a British comic strip heroine."

"Oh." She shook her head in mock disbelief.

Chris cooked bacon and French toast. As they ate, Chris fed scraps to Blaise and Caroline questioned him on his 'mission'. "Wouldn't you be of more use say, in Washington, battling corruption? Or in Russia, Rhodesia, Uganda, Northern Ireland, a thousand other places where mankind is in grief?"

"No."

She frowned.

"I'm sorry. That was flip. It was a fair question. Admittedly, all those places have severe problems. But I saw my duty here as a very personal one."

"How so?"

"Well, the average man, Mr. Man-on-the-street if you will, sees crime as his greatest menace. And on a certain primary level, he's right. No man can stand up for another's rights if he's afraid to leave his own home after dark."

Caroline smiled and touched his hand. "I understand, a little."

"Besides," he said with a grin, "do you know what it takes to get a work permit in some of those places?" She slapped him on the wrist.

"...NOT IF I DO IT."

"I'm going to need your help, though, Bingo." Together, the two men walked back to the front of the bank. The Hazardman never took his eyes off the building.

"What can I do, Haz?"

The vigilante pulled out his grappling line and the vibro-blade. "I'll need a diversion. I'm going to attempt to take them with just these." He held up the two instruments. "I'm afraid if I go in with the disruptor they'll do something to Car... to the McAllister girl."

\*

In the bank, Caroline had seen the Hazardman scout the area. For the first time since her captivity, her hopes were high.

Bull sat on the desk next to her, his BAR cradled in his arms, watching the police outside. "Somethin's goin' on out there, Ribs. Some dude in a maroon jacket and a mask is jawin' with the pigs."

A smile flickered across Caroline's face. They don't even know who they're going to face, she thought.

Bull lowered the rifle muzzle in line with her skull. "What's funny, sweetcakes?"







Caroline tossed her head to clear the hair from her eyes. "Nothing..." The big black man got up from the desk and circled around her, warily.

"I think there is something. I don't much like smart little girls. Maybe I'll just get rid of you..." Caroline cringed in the chair. Her mouth fell open and the lower lip trembled.

"Bull! No!" Ribs's voice broke Bull's resolve. "She's our only insurance!" The manic little blond left his post by the window and knocked the other's rifle out of line. "If the cops hear a shot they'll figure they got nothin' to lose--and we're goners!"

He returned to watching the street in front of the bank. "We got a sweet little set-up here. The cops figure we're part of that 'Rican terror mob. We get outta here alive, they never come lookin' for us!"

BOOOOM!!

All three looked to the west side of the bank. A grenade had landed there, outside the window. Then came a crash from the front window. Caroline tilted her chair and hit the floor just as the Hazardman came through the plate glass feet first.

\*

He surveyed the situation in a glance. *Good girl, Caroline*, he thought. *Now just stay on the floor 'til this is all over.* In his left hand he held the vibro-blade, in his right the hook of his grappling line. The disruptor was still in its fastened holster.

He sent the grappling hook spinning across the bank with a wide side-arm throw. The hook caught in Ribs's jacket. A quick jerk and the little maniac was on the floor.

At the yelp from his partner, Bull gave a roar of rage. Forgetting the rifle, he charged the masked man like his namesake. The Hazardman simply side-stepped at the last minute and, cocking his arm, delivered a bone-wrenching uppercut to Bull's jaw. And succeeded merely in dazing the outlaw. Simultaneously, Ribs twisted around on the floor and pulled the automatic from his belt. Barely aiming, he fired a quick burst at the Hazardman. The masked man gasped as a bullet struck him in the thigh.

One second:

*Pain. Stop the pain. Suppress the pain. You haven't got time for pain now, there's too much at stake. Push it away. Bury it in your unconscious, you can deal with it later.*

Two seconds:

*Bleeding. Stop the bleeding. Can't afford the blood loss. Lower the blood pressure, that'll slow it down. Count slowly...1...2...3 ...There, that's it.*

Three seconds:

Limping slightly, the Hazardman advanced again on Bull. He crashed the hilt of the vibro-blade on the back of the monstrous one's neck. Even through the massive muscles of Bull's neck, the pressure point tactic worked. Bull slumped to the floor. Without pausing, the Hazardman pushed the button activating the energy knife and sent it sailing across the room. It slid easily through Rib's shoulder, pinning him against the floor. As soon as it stopped moving the blade turned off; it would have to be reactivated to be removed.

Now slightly pale, the masked man untied Caroline, helped her up from the floor, and walked out the door of the bank with her. As Bingo approached them, the Hazardman fainted in Caroline's arms.

## epilogue

The park at the west end of Cadman Plaza, in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge, is a favorite dog walker's haunt. Chris Sheridan was no different from any other dog owner. Modesty Blaise had to be walked.

The black whippet bounded ahead of them on her long black leash as Chris and Caroline talked. "So the only thing going through your head yesterday was that you thought of me as a 'friend', rather than as something else. Why did that bother you?"

Chris shrugged. "It seemed such an inadequate way to describe our relationship. Friend is such a common term here on Earth."

"But friendship is a decidedly uncommon thing."

"Agreed. A friend is someone with whom you discuss almost anything. Do you realize that I've never told Bingo Crosby about the Teachers? I told you on our first date.

"A lover is someone with whom you share humanity's greatest physical pleasure--a friend you share the emotional pleasures with. If you find them in one package, that's really special." As he looked at her fondly, she squeezed his hand. The message was clear.

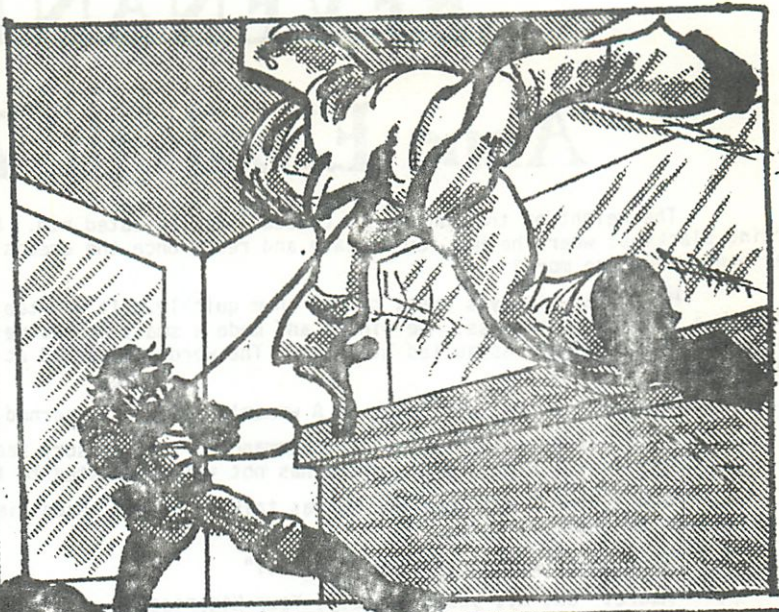
Suddenly he grabbed a stick from the ground. "Hey, I've taught Blaise a new trick. Wanna see?"

"All right," she said with a sigh.

He called Blaise to his side and then threw the stick. "Go get it, girl!" The little whippet raced off, picked the stick up in her mouth, and came back. "Okay, girl, now drop it." She didn't. Instead, the stick still in her mouth, Blaise raced and leaped around the couple, winding her leash tighter and tighter around them until they were finally bound together, face to face.

Caroline was exasperated. "Why couldn't you own a cat, like a normal New Yorker?" Chris grinned sheepishly and kissed her.







# REVENANT

## Anne Elizabeth Zeek

The weight of the sun on his closed lids irritated him. He wanted to stay in that soft, comforting blackness where he had found peace and rest--once the dreams had stopped. The dreams. Were they beginning once more?

He forced his eyes open, closed them quickly. It was too bright, and the light slashed at him with a physical sharpness. He winced and made a small defensive gesture against the light, against the sounds that suddenly assaulted his ears. The words thundered at him, but by straining, he could decipher them.

"Doctor, you're sure he's--" A woman's voice. Concerned, caring. Leia?

"He is in excellent condition, Commander. His sensory receptors are temporarily overloading. The input level is too high and his brain has not yet readjusted to filtering the data."

Damn doctor. Was that *him* he was talking about? Made him sound like a malfunctioning droid. And to Leia. If that *was* Leia...

"Then he is awake? And aware of us?"

"Aware? Oh, my, yes. Acutely, Your Highness."

Highness? That *must* be Leia! Cautiously, Han Solo reopened his eyes. The sun did not hurt so much this time. A slender figure in blue-grey swam in and out of focus before him. Han shifted, trying to get a clearer look, and the figure moved to the side of the bed. Han saw bright hair and wide-spaced blue eyes over a strong, straight nose.

"Luke?" He reached out, felt his hand grasped by strong, slender fingers. "Kid? They fixed your face again? How long--"

He closed his eyes against the intensity of the light. Silken strands of hair brushed across his face and soft lips touched his forehead.

"Leia." Han smiled, tightening his clasp on the hand in his. There was an answering return of pressure just before he lapsed into unconsciousness.

\*

Princess Organa eased her hand out of Han's grip and turned to the hovering med-droid. "Let me know the minute there's any change in his condition, Too-ForCee."

The droid, a spherical mass of components and diagnostic appendages, bobbed obligingly in the air. "He will most probably sleep through the rest of the evening, Your Highness."

She frowned, glanced back at the sleeping Corellian. "He seemed bothered by the light, and yet it's almost twilight. Will there be permanent--"

"That was but a brief malfunction of his visual receptors. The light that seemed dim to you was quite harsh to him."

"And his eyes will have readjusted by the time he wakes again?"

"Yes, Your Highness. His brain will be collecting and analyzing data while he sleeps."

The princess's wide mouth curved into a sardonic grin. "You don't see the humor in that?"

"Princess?" There was a questioning note in Too-ForCee's voice, as though he was wondering how he'd failed his employer.

The princess looked at Han. "The irony of falling back to sleep after being woken from deep sleep is--"

"But, Princess, deep sleep is not analogous to normal sleep. It is more akin to suspended animation, during which all bodily functions and processes--"

The princess held up a hand. "Enough. I don't want a lecture." She looked down at the sleeping man. "Save it for Han, when he wants to know what happened to him." She brushed a strand of light-brown hair back from the unconscious Corellian's forehead. "And to those he loved."

The med-droid bobbed uncertainly. "Oh, dear, oh, dear. I do not think--" The princess directed a stern glance at him from ice-blue eyes and he shut down his voice.

Princess Organa turned from the diagnostic-bed. She tucked her long blonde hair under her military cap, twitched the seams of her blue-grey uniform tunic to a more seemly position. Straightening her shoulders resolutely, Commander Hanel Skywalker, the Princess Organa, walked from the room to announce to her assembled troops that at last, after thirty years of seeking, the legendary lost hero of the Alliance, Han Solo, had been found--and reborn.



This being the year of the Republic 2'6046, Midyears Day,  
in the season of Lategreen, in Vista, on Whillhome

This being the Saga of the Jedi Obi-Wan Kenobi of Ves of the Alderaan  
Enclave as related by Talesteller Lorleyneesi of the whillum Ylatic

# *That Share of Glory*

## *Tale the First - The Father*

### Dedication

From the Jedi Admonition to the Senate as Remembered by the Whills, 1'9687

These are the debts of our heritage:

Honor to the people of the Origins who in time uncounted seeded the  
stars with the moulding touch of sentience.

Longing for the knowledge of the Rings whose folk touched the Force  
and bent it to their ways, reaching across the endless lengths of the  
universe in a union the stars strive for again.

Gratitude to the Five Homes, to Xet, to Urt, to Om, to Bestine, to  
Alderaan, who nourished the flame of knowledge when the Rings  
were extinguished.

And Duty to the Republic wherein that flame grows, wherein the Force  
is known once again in a universe that resounds with sentience.

Let all who would disregard the debts of our heritage be warned:

Remember the loneliness of the Origins and put aside destruction

Remember the lost glory of the Rings and do not covet another's world.

Remember the dependence that binds all folk and protect what you  
cherish through cooperation though you be mighty and another weak,  
though you be hungry and another fat, though you face death  
while another lives.

Remember the Force is all and nothing but the will of Life and that it cannot  
be contained; neither relinquish this free will nor forbid it in another for  
alone through this free choice, through the free will reserved for all  
beings in the force, shall each know a greater share of glory.



A  
THOUSANDWORLDS  
CHRONICLES  
STORY

Maggie Nowakowska



The parents were proud, as most mates are when their union produces a first and wanted offspring. He was Vessan; she, Alderaan. Human both, but different, a mixture of sub-species that could threaten a catalogue of possible failures. But the child was healthy, and the female held him close, surrendering her treasure to the male only after much cajoling; and still she reached out constantly to touch the soft, pale skin, to assure herself that her mate cradled the infant securely.

Arde-wan Kenobi smiled indulgently at his wife, but he held the child firmly, refusing to relinquish his prize. He sat on the side of her bed, one long leg stretched out, the other folded under him, examining the baby happily, cupping the child's head with a gentle hand.

"Bald as a watergem," he chuckled. "I had hoped he'd inherit some of your Alderaan hairiness, love, but it looks like he's got the Vessan thinness instead."

"And he has the Kenobi face and ears!" Wreyn Emarie added with a laugh. "Look at that nose! No self-respecting babe would be born with a profile so old!"

With feigned offense, Kenobi harumphed and bowed his head to touch noses with his son. The child opened his eyes a moment, tried to focus on the huge face so close, but gave up with a scowl. "Ha!" Kenobi crowed, rolling slightly back on the bed. "What an expression! This boy knows what he likes, by the Father!"

Kenobi continued to pet and play with the baby as Wreyn watched with amusement. Arde-wan was not a handsome man; he was too long-faced, and his lean angularity only accentuated the large, dominant Kenobi nose. His father assured him that Kenobis always aged more attractively than they began, but as Arde-wan was disinclined to wait for a later day, he attempted to right the present situation by decorating himself generously. His dark-wavy hair was cut in a style that gentled the awkward face; a thin mustache distracted handily from the dramatic nose. He dressed in the finest clothes he could afford, richly made and exquisitely tailored. His jewelry represented the finest pieces in the art, as might be expected of one who dealt with fine gems daily: rings of woven silven complimented his long, graceful hands; hushmetal belts set off the narrow waist and hips. Little more than twenty-four repyears old, a year away from his Vessan majority, Kenobi presented an image of elegance beyond his experience.

This studied portrait, though, was blithely betrayed that afternoon by an uncontrollable, youthful delight in the miracle he and his wife had accomplished. "He has the Kenobi nose for business, my love," the proud father declared. "May it do him as much good as mine does for me!"

Wreyn smoothed back her dark ash hair and began to rebraid it. A robust woman, with

the full figure so common among full-blooded Alderaan, Wreyn Emarie glowed with a vitality that could not be contained by childbed. Twenty years of growing amidst the political ways of the Alderaan World Court had given her a calm confidence toward life; two years with Arde-wan on the Company's business had honed her talents in the persuasion of peoples. Now a spark of mischief lit her clear blue eyes. "As I recall," she teased, "your brother has that same facial distinction."

Arde-wan scowled, displeased. "Ende has the nose and only that. I think Per picked him up on Kressano; his mind is certainly at the same level as those degenerates."

"Oh, Arde! He's just a boy. And this time he ran away to join the Republican forces, not those wild starhoppers. He's growing up after all."

Kenobi snorted. Getting oneself shot at was even more foolish than dissipating oneself, but he had never understood Ende and probably never would. At 16, Ende-deuc Kenobi had been too wild for Ves's comfortable ways, and had run off to 'be a pirate', leading his father and brother a harried and long chase across the galaxy before being found aboard a Corellian freighter and brought home, protesting. Then, on the day of Ende's petit majority at 18, the rebellious boy had promptly enlisted in the Republic's fight against the latest Sith Incursions. Already the elder Kenobi was hearing disturbing reports of his son's unmilitary conduct; Arde repeated the rumors to Wreyn, who raised an eyebrow, but still laughed. "He'll get himself killed before he reaches 30 if he keeps to his reckless ways," Kenobi insisted.

Wreyn's expression turned thoughtful. She reached over to smooth her son's blanket. "I don't know, Arde," she said quietly. "I think he'll outlive the three of us."

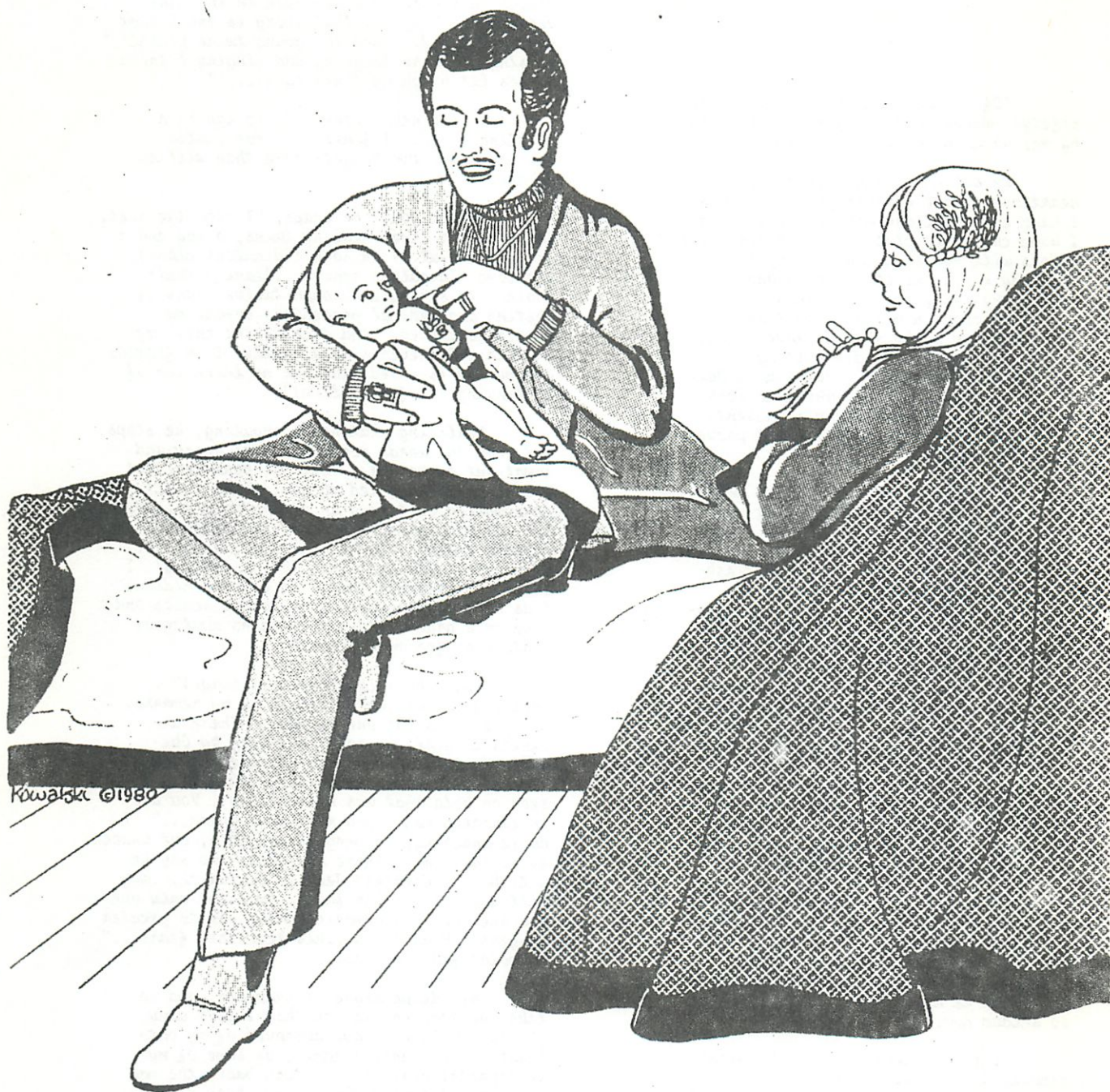
A chill crept into Arde-wan's good humor at his wife's words; he held the baby closer, as if to protect the small warm body against the sudden cold. Kenobi wanted to ask what Wreyn meant, but he was afraid to. The Emarie were a family with deep ties to the Jedi Knights; Wreyn's brother led a squad in the battles beyond Lucef. And though Wreyn was not of the Jedi herself, she had a perception of the Way that often unnerved her husband.

"You shouldn't think of such things, Wreyn," he scolded, trying to keep the threat he felt from his voice. "Talk like that comes from listening to your brother too much. Jed! speak of life and death as if they were children's toys."

"Oh, Arde," Wreyn sighed. She reached out to take the baby from him. "You worry too much. And how is my little lifestar liking all this attention?" The boy burrowed his head in the blankets at his mother's breast and she accommodated him, ignoring her husband's frown.

Arde-wan watched the baby nurse and worried anyway. Ende might disdain his stolid devotion to the Company and the peaceful ways of merchandising; Wreyn might laugh at his cautious view of life's fragility, but Arde-wan Kenobi did







did not care for danger or jokes. He loved his living far too much, and the joy of each day was a treasure beyond price he was determined to bequeath to this child of his.

And in this love of being, he was not so different from his errant brother and his thoughtful wife at that.

\*

"Of course I was concerned for his safety! Wreyn could only have one child by me; he is my claim to the future."

We sit in a large solarium, the heartroom of all northern Ves dwellings. I have come to learn more about the Jedi I have chosen to place in the Sagas. The Elders will not sanction my subject; they say Kenobi is still too young to judge; they sway with the winds of uncertainty about him that blow from his Enclave. And if he should prove worthy of Saga, they further distrust my ability to sing of him. But I know Obi-wan as a friend. I know where to look in his past to illuminate his present; I believe in his future. I shall prove the Elders wrong.

I was well-met, with wine, wafers, and a blessing in the Force. But now my reception grows chilly. I am grateful that the Vessan culture is a gentle one, otherwise the questions I must ask might bring this capable, yet frustrated, man to anger. Yes, he was fearful for his son's future, but I have always been bothered by his son's recounting of the father's obsession that he not become a Jedi. This man is educated; he is of a Jedi family himself, two generations back. There is more here than Obi-wan is able to tell me.

The man sits deeply in his chair. He is youthfully slim, with only the slightest grey in his hair, the finest lines of early middle-years showing at his eyes. He is uncomfortable.

"I think it is obvious why I did not want him exposed to danger at every turn! I'm certain he can explain it to you..." He hesitates, distracted. "Though I imagine it is as unimportant to him as it has always been. I see him so seldom now. He's...busy."

I say nothing, knowing Obi-wan's excuses for avoiding the endless reminders that he marry, yet knowing that cannot be the true reason for the disagreements between the men. Arde-wan Kenobi, I am told, will soon marry. A Paian woman. There is time for another heir. But he is determined on his excuses and begins,

"There was a mutation in my grandfather's great-grandfather's time. Some space mishap on the corp-yacht that killed most of our line. Company management floundered; the allya Kenobi lost many holdings. Fewer line children were conceived; fewer birthed alive. We thought the problem solved once, our familyline saved..." he pauses, his sarcasm a new note in the conversation. "Ah, but that story is one I know you have heard. 'And the young twins Kenobi', he sings, 'were laughing and singing / their sabers lit brightly their eyes....'"

I have never been able to ignore a dangling quote. I finish: "For justice and freedom / two Knights more than willing to die."

"Thank you," he snaps, "I know the rest. Twins of our line, healthy twins, a boy and a girl...dead at 19 on some ridiculous planet for some ridiculous reason...leaving their brother to struggle through twelve years of testing and medical procedures before my mother conceived. And this is the end: my brother will never sire a family; I am flawed; and my son is a Jedi who has no intention of continuing the family line!"

Realizing that he is shouting, he stops, but soon the words come again, as angry and impatient as before. "Obi was born healthy! I had short-circuited my familyline's self-consumption by taking an Alderaani wife. My son was born free of all but the least important effects of the mutation. I... I... Of course I was terrified for his safety! I still am, prisoner that I am of some ridiculous hope that he will come to his senses and give me a grandchild. I offer no apologies whatsoever for my concern!"

"But the allya Kenobi is large!" I challenge, now doubly foolish in my remarks. "Your line is but one of many. There are others to fill the role left open by Obi-wan! You will have other children if you remarry. Oh, certainly, Ser, you must have seen on Hala what was his destiny! You are an educated man...you must have known..." I am floundering, knowing my mistakes, but unable to avoid them. "There are those who say he will be the greatest Jedi in centuries...why will you not set him free? Am I the only one who sees how his memories drive him to greater dangers? Your fears...his teachers' fears..." My voice fades at last.

His displeasure is palpable, and so like the same in his son that I look away. Obi-wan would not have approved of my outburst either, nor, I admit, of some of my interpretations. When I turn back, the man is gone. Assuming that I have been dismissed, I begin to gather my instruments and my wrap.

He is standing in the stairwell that leads into the entry way when I stand. His hands are clasped before him at belt level, his posture is rigidly erect; again like the



son.

"Have you any idea of how early my boy was fascinated by the Jedi? And don't stare at me so. I said I would speak with you and so I will. I suppose it is fitting that my flamboyant son with his stubborn insistence that he is right should have a foolish young Whill equally convinced as chronicler. Well, how old?"

"His uncle has said..."

"Emarie had to have it pointed out."

"Oh. Then on Hala. During the Sith raid."

A memory of pain loosens the grim expression on that long face. "No. Not Hala," he says quietly, stepping back into the room, adding a rueful aside to himself, "By then I was too late." He stops on the landing to my left. "But I will not admit to being too protective in my actions after Hala. You have no conception of the fear... I was desperate then. The dangers... of a Jedi in the family... I did what I had to do."

"Then," I venture cautiously, "you admit to your obstructions?"

He makes a noise of impatience, a deprecatory gesture. "If he tells you I have not admitted it before this, he is wrong. You are too enamored of him; remember that he is a son first, before he is a Jedi. He has his misconceptions." He glances about the room, gathering more memories. "Yes, I knew his inclinations early, though. Father knows, I did not see them then for what they truly were. If I had, things might have been different. I see now that what happened after Hala was irrelevant. My early mistakes... most in this very room, when he was just a young child. He was a bright boy... I let that blind me..."

A hush that I am wary of breaking falls. "And yet," I whisper, "who can truly read the promise in a child's eye?"

"He was four," the man says, not hearing me. "He warned me first at four, here, in this room."

\*

Ves, 6015.30.8

Lights flickered into life with the last rays of the setting sun, sparkling like spinning gold above the guests. The solarium was awash with a soft glow when the first breeze of early night rose, swirling scents of the laurel outside into the room. From the copper braziers scattered here and there among the plantings, a heavy, cedar aroma rose.

Arde-wan Kenobi stood on the first landing of the entry steps and surveyed the large gathering of family and visitors he had orchestrated that night. He was pleased with the party. Life's turn of fortune was gentle for him; the Company prospered. He could gather his own in happy entertainment whatever the ways of the universe about them. This peace was what he toiled for; this was his pleasure.

In a corner near the open lawn doors the thin, compelling sounds of a Hieldie q'yota sounded. Kenobi smiled to see his catten company so relaxed that a song had been coaxed from them. Reksiss was a master of the q'yota. His instrument gleamed from more than the precious woods of its box, the stones in its key handles. Tomorrow, Reksiss and Kenobi would sharpen claw and nail over the price of such merchandise, but tonight both would be at ease in the music.

The tune was a simple air, a legend whose details were lost in the millennia of Hieldie history, a story of love and loss perfect for a late summer's evening.

*"High free in the mountains, the snows  
blind with cold,  
while down o'er the river, the gentle  
clouds roll;  
deep sink in the valley, a wild flower did  
grow,  
and her name was Berborra, the gem of  
Harrow."*

Absinera's voice was high and clear above her mate's chords, her throatiness more of a trill than a growl, her sibilants more whispers of wind than a hiss. In the soft artificial lights, amid the safe company of friends, she had removed her eyeshields, and as she sang, the jewelry woven into her mane matched the sparkle of her wide catten eyes, blue and blue. These gems that winked in the silver-grey pelt were Kenobi-set, a parade of stones especially selected by Arde-wan, who knew well the weaknesses of his visiting Hieldie traders.

Wreyn and Allyn Emarie joined in the chorus. Absinera smoothly dipped her tail in pleasure at the compliment; Emarie bowed in response. The Jedi moved slowly, his stocky body still awkward. Kenobi wondered if Allyn should be up from bed so soon. And yet, if Wreyn's brother had been sent to Ves to recuperate from his war wounds because he was too restless a man to remain in convalescence amidst the battle-readiness of the Alderaan Enclave, it was foolish to think he would lie still while a party revelled. Kenobi frowned slightly, vaguely disturbed by the presence of a battle-scarred warrior on the peaceful family homegrounds.

*"From the isle of Sa'bude, appeared in my  
view,  
a youth sure besabered, 'tis strange as  
'tis true.  
A star in his breastfur, his eyess in  
greenglow,  
and he sang for Berborra, the gem of  
Harrow."*



The chorus rose again, with more voices joining. Arde-wan winced slightly at a cousin's sour notes, exchanged a silent snicker with an agemate who stood nearby, then saw that his third guest was watching him with a condescending amusement and quickly banished the responses from his features.

This other guest, a Kraratzev noble from Vehenev, was not someone to appear too casual before. The presence of the Prince of Zakrefske on Ves had been unexpected and his attendance this night was a coup for the Company which was in fierce competition with the Zakrefske holdings in Vehenev Commonhold. Still, the Prince Ignazi Petrovich Zakrefske was an uncomfortable note in the evening's camaraderie. A Vessan at home was too easy, too intimate for a blooded Kraratzev; well past dinner, well into the libations, the man stood as formally as when he had arrived, his manner obligingly regal, his occasional comments touched with a cultural superiority that jarred. MiddleWorld did not normally condescend to CenterWorld; Kenobi was acutely aware of the insult and fully intended to take advantage of Zakrefske's new debt to him in their next negotiations. Until then, he would watch his behavior around the man.

*"To the Enclave of Albi, his bride took  
her there,  
but short were the fond years these  
lovers did share..."*

Again the chorus came around. Zakrefske did not join in, raising his goblet to his lips instead. His sleeve embroidery glistened with shimmercloth as he moved and was reflected in the jewelry he wore, pieces as fine as any worn by the Kenobis in the room and evidence of a wealth far greater. Arde-wan found himself dismissing some of the work as gaudy, as over-burdened with the ephemeral importance of family heirlooms, until a chrystoplatet in platinum workings flashed and Kenobi smiled, secure in the knowledge that the most delicately-crafted piece the man wore was both Kenobi-designed and Kenobi-dealt. This was his advantage over companies such as Zakrefske of Vehenev: among the many cousins relaxing in the solarium tonight were the finest artisans of Ves, the soul of the Company whose jewelry would continue to dazzle the galaxy long after such as Zakrefske had given up their tradings and gone back to the agriculture that was Vehenev Commonholds' base. The allya Kenobi would endure, and Arde-wan Kenobi would not let himself be intimidated by Kraratzev arrogance.

*"No more through the grasses so flaxen  
will race,  
when narrows the blue eye, when stills  
the soft face;  
in silent affection, deep sorrow  
does flow,  
since gone is Barborra, the gem of  
Harrow."*

Behind Kenobi, a vibrant voice joined in the last chorus, and when the singing was finished, a young Vessan dressed in the formal blues of the Republican Star Fleet stepped for-

ward to applaud loudly. Arde-wan gave his brother a deadly look, but Ende-deuc chose not to notice and kept up his whistles and trills and claps.

"Wonderful! Wonderful! Absinera, if you ever get bored with commerce, I know a good dozen cantinas you could star in! We'd clean up!"

There were smothered chuckles among the younger cousins, while their elders frowned at the breach of manners. Absinera curled her tail about her leg in slight embarrassment, while her mate flicked his ears restlessly. Zakrefske's expression became even graver.

Ende-deuc ignored these reactions as well. He reached around Arde-wan for some of the snacks one of the servers had left on a nearby stairshelf, commenting chattily, "And that's how we show our appreciation in Downport. Excuse me, Arde, I can't reach the wine."

Arde didn't move. Ende shrugged and stepped around him, subsequently tipping his glass to a couple of teens who lounged in the shadows beside the stairs. The room's attention drifted away from the brothers; Ende's antics were common knowledge. The latest scandal was finished; it would take more than misbehavior at a late summer party from the Deuc to top his latest adventure.

"If you can't act civilized among your family," Arde-wan murmured at last, "at least remember the honor of your uniform! I should think you would be ashamed to ask for so much attention. You should--"

"I shouldn't do anything you tell me to, dear brother, so don't try," Ende-deuc warned with moderate affection. "Haven't you and Per interfered enough in my life? You wanted me back in blue and here I am, but I'll act any way I damn well please."

The two brothers avoided each other's gaze, neither willing to forget the differences that divided them, neither about to give the other the courtesy of a soothing remark.

Yes, Ende-deuc was back in blue. But though Ende-deuc Kenobi had properly enlisted over four years before, he had gone AWOL, still a fifth shy of his termend, avoiding a battle he had deemed too risky, and disappearing into the alleyways of Downport. While their father then worked to keep that AWOL from turning into desertion under fire charges, Arde-wan had once again had the port cities on a dozen planets scoured for his errant brother. On Commenor among his old Corellian friends, Ende-deuc had been found and brought back by a brother more formidable in his anger than Ende-deuc had reckoned...and by the force of Vessan law which enabled their father to disown Ende until his full majority of 25 was reached. Now, still only 22 and under the threat of formal charges as well as the threat of losing his inheritance, Ende-deuc was back in uniform. And hating every minute of it.



"You're out of uniform at that," Arde accused crossly, breaking the silence. He nodded at the multi-stoned ring that wound about Ende's left third finger, then cascaded down the back of his hand. "I suppose you'll pawn that for gambling debts before your first leave is up."

The younger Kenobi finished a drink from his glass, shook his head slightly in exasperation, then benignly scanned the crowded room. "Arde," he said casually, "may a bug-eye squat on the Father's--"

"Damn, watch your language when you're a guest in this house!"

Ende's head snapped around. "Oh, so I'm a guest in my own family home, brother? How quaint a notion. I suppose you've picked it up from your Vehenev friend over there. His people go in for that sort of thing. Well, you and Per have told me all you're going to...."

Arde-wan felt a headache coming on. Ende was an overage adolescent and would always be so; to that, Arde-wan was finally becoming reconciled. There was no talking to the boy when he started on his long list of grievances against the family. Their mother had given up long ago, treating Ende kindly, but like the child he insisted on staying; only their father now remained convinced that Ende could be re-deemed. Arde-wan mentally complimented his Per's virtuousness while snapping at Ende, "Oh, shut down the complaints, Ende! I, for one, am not in the least impressed with your little independence act."

"Well, that's a shame. Means you probably won't be impressed with the children's independence act, either."

"What? I thought you were supposed to bring them in. Where are they?"

"I don't know. They weren't where you said they were going to be, and when I circled the grounds, they weren't there either." Ende smiled teasingly. "Seems like they've taken a hike, dear brother. Terribly inconsiderate and independent of them, I know."

"Oh, damn," Kenobi muttered, sliding by his brother's jibe. He wasn't worried about the children--there was little to harm them about the estate or the neighboring countryside--but this was a damned nuisance.

He stepped to the top of the stairs. "Excuse me," he called out, raising his voice above some nearby laughter. "Everybody, excuse me! I hate to interrupt, but it seems the children have taken off somewhere."

There was a general hubbub, and a few grumbles, as various parents rose. None of the Vessans appeared unduly concerned; the children had been sent to play outside after dinner and their tardiness was a matter of annoyance rather than fear. The catten couple, though, quickly made their way to Kenobi's side. The Kraratzev

also stepped forward, offering his assistance should anything have happened...

"No, no," Kenobi interrupted Zakrefske as politely as possible when he saw the effect the man's words had on the catten. "Thank you, but really, there is nothing to worry about--"

"Ser Kenobi!" Reksiss called up the stairs. "To be wandering about in the dark!"

"Our kit, she is so young!" Absinera added, her ears canted back. "There are woods nearby!"

"My friends, my dear friends, you have no reason for concern, I assure you! The lands of Ves are safe, quite unlike Hieldie. We do not even have the large animals our hardy colleague Prince Zakrefske hunts on Vehenev. There are only ackconeys and treemunks. Please relax. This is only an inconvenience. Look about you and see that my family is calm."

Wreyn could be seen coming quickly through the parents, intent on Absinera's comfort, but the male catten was just as upset. "Cerrana is easily frightened, Our Host. She does not know your forests and could climb if startled."

"Hsst, Reksiss!" his mate keened. "If she climbs, we will not find her before dawn! She is so young!"

Feeling a tremor in his stomach at the way Reksiss' ears were also laid back, Kenobi turned sharply on a cousin. "Gwhy!" he hissed. "I thought you said Geetey knew better than to pull stunts like this!"

"Eh, Arde! What can I say?" Gwhy-wan shrugged, adding when his wife nudged him, "I don't know what's gotten into him lately; he turned twelve and suddenly started following his own advice. But don't worry, I'll talk soundly to him on this, yes, I will. I'll sound him out till his ears ring!"

"Talk to him!" The room quieted at the loud exclamation from Zakrefske. The husky Kraratzev came forward and stood with one foot on the step below Kenobi. "I should think such disobedience warrants more than a 'talking to', sir," rang the deep voice. "What that boy needs is a good thrashing with a firm belt!"

"Oh, by all means, Prince," Ende-deuc exclaimed, stepping in front of Arde-wan, accentuating the disapproving silence that had fallen at Zakrefske's remarks. "Thrash the boy! Why, wouldn't that do wonders for his disposition! I'll thank you to know, sir, that Vessan parents don't thrash their children!" As the family studiously ignored Ende-deuc's outburst, and as Arde-wan fantasized the pleasures of fratricide, the younger Kenobi continued. "Of course," Ende-deuc added, pausing a moment for dramatic effect, "on Ves, they simply reenlist them in battle!"

That's it! Arde-wan fumed. Tomorrow, no later, he would talk seriously with their



*father about this uncontrollable--*

"You are the younger brother," Zakrefske stated flatly. Ende-deuc bowed mockingly low. "I have heard of your indiscretions. You must consider yourself fortunate."

"What? Fortunate that my father throws me back at the Sith?!"

The nobleman absently brushed some offending particle from the weaverwool suit Ende-deuc wore. "You should maintain more pride in your uniform. I say 'fortunate', indeed. On Veheney, we throw troublesome younger sons at the priests, draped in the cassocks of Holy Orders!"

The smile Arde-wan gave Zakrefske was heartfelt. He stepped past the sputtering Ende-deuc and began to tag various relatives for a groundsearch.

"Allyn went to call the Enclave," Wreyn whispered to him as he passed. "Perhaps they've seen the children."

"He what?" Kenobi stopped. "Oh... damn," he muttered, gracing his wife with a weary look. "If it weren't bad enough to be hampered with a brother who was no help at all, he had to be further burdened with a brother-in-law who went off without consulting anyone. Jedi were like that; Arde-wan often found it annoying. "Wreyn, I don't want to bother the Enclave over a silly thing like wandering children. Why didn't Allyn..."

"Arde! Wreyn! There's no need to worry!" The voice was deep and modulated to carry to all parts of the solarium. There was also something compelling about it, some skill in the timbre and manner that turned every head toward the speaker, willing or not. Zakrefske came to an alert, if reluctant, attention; even Arde-wan, however accustomed he had become to that voice over the last few weeks, however aware of the trick he was, turned to the man who stood on a similar landing across the room.

When he knew he had the party's attention, Allyn Emarie spoke again, allowing the atmosphere of command he had created to drift into confident reassurance. "I just linked with the Enclave," the Jedi announced. "The children are fine. They wandered over a while back and should be back any moment with an escort."

"All right, boys and girls, humans and cattens, mischiefs and precious gems! Time to report in to your doting parents!" Arde-wan watched a slender Gradelli Jedi gesture grandly up the east slope of the lawn at the parents who waited outside the solarium. Three knights stood with him: a Brokovian ac'pitter, a Vessan, and a rock-steady Halite, massive and saurian in the dim light. About them, the children shouted and danced.

The Gradelli spotted Arde-wan and called out, "Greetings, Ser Kenobi! 'Tis myself, Freeskhai. We are late, but we come with apolo-

gies! Now, all of you children to your damsires. Go on, quickly now!"

Dashing up the hill, the children were haloed by a clutter of glowlights, sparks of glistening color that stayed close to the small Vessans until some unspoken command from below stayed the tiny brights in midair, and gathered them back to the Jedi. Childish chatter soon surrounded Arde-wan, mixing with grown-up scolding and Gwhy-wan's irritated demand that Geetey-wan, who had lingered by the Gradelli's side, come up, right now!

A questioning sound from Wreyn beside him reminded Arde-wan that he had not seen Obi-wan among the children, nor Canerra, but a sudden, delighted yowl quickly told him one of the missing had been found. With a peering squint into the darkness, he followed the loping catten down the hill and found his son nestled in the arms of the Halite who had also managed to become attached to a catten kit. Wreyn chuckled at the sight of Canerra clinging to the Jedi's head and neck; Arde-wan nodded and they followed Absinera and Reksiss down.

"Now, now, nothing is to worry about, silky ones," the Halite rasped when Reksiss lifted a cranky kit from her perch, hissing at Canerra firmly while his mate apologized. "I've a tough enough hide for a kitten's claws to rake. But do you know the owners of this bundle here?" He jostled the child in his arms and was rewarded with a prompt protestation as a small, dark head peeked over his corded arms at Arde-wan.

"Ah, I believe he's ours," Kenobi said, reaching for his son.

The Halite lifted a horny chin to stay the Vessan. "A moment, Ser. I have a courtesy to demand from him. Tiny human, I believe you have something of mine. Ah, do be most careful with it now."

Puzzled, Arde-wan watched as the pale hands unfolded to reveal a glowlight burning white in Obi-wan's grasp. He started; he reached out instinctively to protect his child, but Obi-wan only giggled and pulled the glow closer to himself. "Siels gave it to me," he explained, equally protective of his prize.

"That I did, Ser," Siels admitted to Kenobi, "for a while. He grabbed at it so, I thought to learn him a caution, but he handles it well, don't you know, for a younger? Now, though, tiny, you are home and must give it back to me. Ser Kenobi, I assure you, dangerous it is not."

"But he's only four..." Arde-wan took back his hand. He heard his voice fade on a note of reluctance and felt a curious isolation, as if the night sounds about him all had receded. A sense of the unreal washed over him then, a perception of the encounter between boy and Jedi that unnerved him. He fought a momentary panic, the memory of his grandfather's dark stories of Jedi danger. The lights, he



told himself, it must be the lights. Obi shouldn't... The desecrating glows were common enough as nightlights, of course. The solarium was golden with like lamps. But these were complex miniature powerhouses, field equipment for the wars, unknown quantities that had been toyed and tinkered with by the Jedi who in their mysterious ways had adapted them to personal use. Allyn had one, a light by which Wreyn seemed to be able to perceive her brother's moods. Of course watching Obi-wan bracket one so calmly between childish palms chilled Arde. It wasn't right; Obi was too young.

Still, no one else seemed upset. Beside him, Wreyn seemed content to merely watch Obi-wan between words of assurance to the catten. The Jedi merely swayed his head from side to side in further comfort. Arde-wan crossed his arms, still disturbed, but acquiescent.

Siels rumbled politely then and set Obi-wan down on the ground. He straightened, stepped back half a pace, cocked his head and held out a hand. "Well, Master Kenobi, can you figure out how the glow is given back to me?"

Obi-wan looked up at the Halite's right eye. His lips were pursed, his narrow face set in determination. "Of course," he said decisively and held out the light, cupped in both hands.

But the glow did not gently float from his grasp to the Jedi's. Arde-wan watched with narrowed eyes as the light, instead of diminishing, brightened, its white almost blinding if one looked too closely. His son had no hesitation in doing so, though. Obi-wan glared at the glow, exclaiming his impatience loudly and rudely. His quick temper drew a warning hiss from his mother and, as if in response, the whiteness dimmed, almost extinguishing. Alarmed, Obi-wan cried out and turned anxious eyes to the towering reptilian before him. With a worried sound he held the feeble light higher for the Jedi's care.

Siels laughed and cupped his hands around the boy's, his claws clicking with an eerie echo in Arde-wan's ears. *Stay away from my son*, Kenobi heard himself say--or was it his grandfather's voice?--in the recesses of his mind. He shook his head slightly, irritated with himself.

The glow had faltered a moment when Siels cupped it, but now it began to shimmer again, fluorescing then swirling into a creamy soft color. Gently now it lifted from human hands to firm reptilian ones. Siels bowed to Obi-wan and thanked him for his excellent care of the glow.

"Hwo!" the boy exhaled loudly, shattering the delicate exhilaration of power with a high-pitched shriek. "Ay! Per! Mem! Did you see? I did it! I did it! Just like Ta Allyn!"

Arde-wan crouched down and pulled the

giddy boy to him, holding him tightly against his legs. He had seen all right, and what he had seen, as well as his reactions, confused him. The night seemed bright about Obi-wan as the boy exclaimed gaily over his feat to anyone who would listen; it muffled the words between Wreyn and the catten into murmurs; it set a seemingly unbridgeable distance between Arde-wan and Obi and everyone else. It engulfed his son and it was cold, so cold to Arde...

"Arde?" The touch on his shoulder was a familiar warmth. For no more than a second, Arde-wan felt an understanding in his wife, then it was gone and he told himself he had imagined it. "Arde? Are you all right?"

He nodded. This was ridiculous. Grandper's stories of how the Jedi had taken away his aunt and uncle had nothing to do with Obi-wan.

"And then," the high voice broke into his hearing again, "and then, Canni jumped and she hissed and she climbed all the way up a tree!"

"What?!" Absinera exclaimed. "How did she get down?"

A laugh from up the slope answered her. The spindly Gradelli loped toward them, calling out, "Never fear, madame, when our colleague Tanger is about no treasure is too high to remain hidden!" Freeskbaï gestured at the Brokovian Jedi who whistled a friendly jibe back. "Actually, it caused us a moment of concern," Freeskbaï admitted when he reached the group. He nodded at Arde-wan. "Which is why we were late. It was no fault of the young man, Geetey."

"Canerra," Reksiss chided. "You are a troublemaker."

"Oh, no, not her! She was startled when one of the children ran ahead to ambush the group. No," Freeskbaï laughed, reaching down to tossle Obi-wan's head, "this young fellow here is who delayed us. He saw Tanger bring Canerra forcefully out of the branches, then down on a wing, and break me if he didn't scoot up a forkish tree and demand to be taken down the same way!"

"Obi-wan!" Wreyn gasped, echoing the catten.

Firm in his father's grip, Obi-wan could do little else than squirm and smile innocently. The grin was ineffective; Wreyn continued to frown.

"Don't be too harsh on him," Freeskbaï advised when Arde-wan picked Obi-wan up into his arms, stilling the boy's mobility completely. "He's a bright fellow and not at all frightened of us, which is unusual for one his age."

"Well, he should be," Arde-wan heard Wreyn say. His attention, though, was on the Gradelli who had reached out to pat Obi-wan again. Kenobi felt himself drawing back from the thin brown fingers. Obi-wan's giggle only heightened the caution still with him.



Yet, once again he schooled himself. After all, he had nothing against the Jedi. Sweet Suns! No rational person could deny the debt the galaxy owed them! This whole reaction was absolutely ridiculous... Obi-wan was turning his arms again, telling Freeskbai that he had let Siels take the glow back. The ease with which the boy spoke with strangers was to be expected, Kenobi reminded himself; he had raised the boy to be so. Again, Siels was thanking Obi, adding some sort of lesson about such devices. Kenobi decided he must talk with the boy when alone. Obi's casualness must not be transformed into demands and arrogance. After all, children did not let adults take back what was theirs in the first place. Yes, Obi was entirely too easy with...

"Arde! Are you going to keep us out here all night?" Allyn Emarie's voice carried easily from the house. "Come on, everybody! You, too, Freeskbai, Tanger, Siels, and you with that red hair! The wine's mulled and ready!"

The night dropped back into place, the spell broken. Kenobi turned to his wife, his face a study in exasperation. "Must he always sound as if I am always two steps behind him?"

"Oh, Arde," Wreyn Emarie sighed.

The Jedi stayed late into the night, talking about the wars in the eastern sectors, sharing a whilltale or two with their hosts. The children, once inside and in adult company, became shy of the Jedi, staying close to their parents at first, then leaving for the playroom nearby. All but Obi-wan.

Refusing each invitation to play, the boy nestled in his father's arms, slowly munching seasoned wafers, his eyes intent upon the visitors and only darting away when some glow brightened at a laugh or exclamation of its owner. Twice Arde-wan tried to relinquish his son to the Housemaster and bed, but each time, Obi-wan objected. Finally, Kenobi looked to Wreyn for assistance, only to be told that so long as the boy behaved she could see no reason to exclude him from the stories. Once again, Arde-wan gave in.

It was only when the Jedi left, taking their glows and the exuberant feeling that surrounds any of their Order, that Obi-wan began to doze. Kenobi signaled for the Housemaster again. He came, picked up the warm sleeping figure and turned out of the conversation alcove just in time to bump into the Prince of Zakrefske.

Kenobi saw the look of disapproval that flashed over Zakrefske's face when he saw Obi-wan. "We are generous with our children if they are well-behaved, sir," Arde-wan explained, smiling to himself in quiet pride that his boy was capable of such attentive, quiet, manners. "We prefer to allow--"

"He is your heir," the Prince said

brusquely. "That I understand. One cannot begin too early to impress upon a child what his business is to be."

The comment was a welcome draft that lifted what was left of the night's odd feelings from Arde-wan's consciousness. He was foolish to have reacted so. Of course, Obi had to learn to field whatever the galaxy might surprise him with: alien cultures, the complexities of galactic law and galactic socializing, the Jedi. A proper Company head had to be masterful in all areas. Kenobi relaxed on his lounge and nodded benignly at two cousins who suggested Reksiss play the Daysend Canticle on the grand multichord as an end for a fine at-home gathering. Arde-wan smiled contentedly; it had been a fine party.

Ves, 6015.35.4

There was an early fall that year. When the mists turned into daily fogs that obliterated all but one's immediate surroundings well before fifthend, Arde-wan arranged to have the solarium winterized a few days before he and Wreyn began their CenterWorld branch rounds.

The day the workteam was to arrive, he gave the room one last check and was surprised to find Obi-wan there. "Obi? Obi, what are you doing? I told you the gardeners are...what have you got there?"

The boy looked up from his work and rubbed a dirty hand across his cheek. He was kneeling in front of a newly cleared patch of ground in some plantings. Tools were at his side, a mess of garden loam all about him, and a small box of thick green plants with clusters of multi-petaled orange flowers was by his feet.

Arde-wan's heart fell when he saw the new cuttings. Who had been so insensitive to give these flowers to a child? Obi-wan was too young to understand why they would not grow here. Arde-wan had never been able to face a child's disappointment and he felt pained already at what he knew awaited his son. "Why, Obi," he said gently, crouching at the boy's side. "Those are kazellums. They won't grow here."

"Yes, they will. The Jedi said they will."

Puzzled, Kenobi sat back on his heels. "Obi-wan, where did you get these?"

"At the Enclave. Mem likes them. See, Siels gave me this." He held out a small box of neatly arranged fertilizer capsules.

Kenobi frowned. Yes, the Jedi would have such means to initiate rooting in alien soil--as would Arde-wan were he worthy of such a gift, or willing to pay the price--but he knew the cultivation of kazellums demanded talents which were greater than the power of nutrients.



Anger over the callousness of giving his son false hopes warred with the knowledge that the Jedi were not unfeeling people. Why had they... why didn't they just leave small boys alone?

"Yes, Obi," Kenobi said, reaching for the boy's trowel. "Your mother likes them very much and I'm sure she could care for them properly were she here. She is very talented that way and you do have the correct fertilizer. But Mem and I are going the day after next--"

"Oh, Per," Obi-wan said with a shake of his head. "I'll grow them!"

Arde-wan rubbed at his forehead, trying to think of what to say next. He was truly glad to hear the confidence in his son's voice; he had encouraged such self-belief himself. But Obi did not know yet that some results defy even the firmest wills.

"When did you and your mother go to the Enclave, son?"

The short dark hair rustled softly. "Don't tell Mem, Per!" he insisted. "It's a surprise!" Obi-wan held his fingers to his lips, leaving smudges there, too.

"Obi-wan, did your Ta Allyn take you to the Enclave?!" And if he did, Kenobi promised himself, that would be the end of one Alderaan's visit in this--

"I went by myself, Per," Obi-wan explained patiently. "It's a *surprise*. Swee'suns, that was a *dumb* question, Per."

"Obi-wan!" Arde-wan was shocked and his tenor of voice caused his son's head to drop worriedly. Wreyn was certainly right; this boy needed to learn a little fear of the Jedi! To think, bothering the Enclave!

An echo of that odd fear drifted into Arde-wan's awareness, a feeling of caution, of danger, of powers he did not understand. He shook his head to clear it. He would have to apologize to the Captain before they left; yes, and he would strenuously advise them to discourage any young visitors. And Emarie: it was entirely possible that Allyn had inspired some of this wandering, what with all the stories and songs he was filling Obi's head with, especially after the party. Well, Emarie was going with Arde-wan and Wreyn as far as Alderaan; his influence would soon stop.

"Per?" Obi-wan's crystal blue eyes looked up under pale lashes. "My flowers are going to grow, really. I can ask Siels to help me."

The hesitant voice softened Arde-wan's scolding. "No, Obi," he said, "you may not go to the Enclave again. It's much too far for a little boy. You must not bother the Jedi; they have far more important things to do."

"I'm not bothering them," the boy mumbled, but he promised not to go off again

without telling anyone. Arde-wan smiled at the cleverness of the compliance; he was pressing for a more specific promise when the gardeners arrived and the subject faded away.

Ves, 6015.49.1

Arde-wan and Wreyn were back on Ves before the Galactic New Year. After the sterility of space and the manufactured plushness of showrooms, they were grateful to be home, whatever the winter weather. As was customary, Obi-wan and his sitter were waiting in the solarium to greet his parents with the traditional wine and wafers.

There were gifts to distribute, but Obi-wan could not contain himself long enough to finish his bread, let alone unwrap his present. He grabbed his mother's arm and tugged at her until she followed him across the solarium. Arde-wan went, too, laughing and wondering what Obi-wan was up to, but when he stepped around a brazier and came upon his family, he stopped cold.

His wife was kneeling at her son's side, the boy bouncing happily in his pride of accomplishment, and at his feet spread a jungle of kazellums, their brilliant petals like flames against the frosted winter windows.

\*

"I should have taken him with us then instead of waiting nearly three years. I was foolish--foolish!--to have left him alone so much."

*It is the second day of my visit. The morning has dawned clear and we sit in the sunlight that fills the home's windowed earlyroom. He seems eager to talk now, as if he is reviewing the past for the first time in many years. And although at times he appears wary of what he tells me, he is also absorbed in the recitation. I must refrain from thinking he is justifying himself and remind my suspicious nature that Obi-wan, too, accepts his father's version of the past. Each still circles the question of the family and the Company as if that is all that distresses them. I am beginning to suspect differently, but, having learned my lesson in hasty speech yesterday, I keep quiet. A skilled tale unfolds the truths slowly and I will be patient.*

"Yes, I thought it over last night, Ser Whill," he says, arranging the cavine perk-equipment. "And that is where I made my mistake. Obi started pre-schooling the next spring and I lost control over his time. The children always visit the Enclave, you know. I did, when I was in school! It is an...adventure. If a teacher is wise, a



field trip or two can be made of the Enclave: history, philosophy, art, galactic politics...it's a perfect setting for inspiring study. And, as I said, you stop by with your friends. The commissarian is dead now, but then he was the same as when I was a boy--an easy touch for a sweet or some exotic foodstuff brought back by the knights. Oh yes, once Obi started school, there was no keeping him from the Jedi.

"And, really, how could I, in good conscience? I have nothing but the highest respect for the Order. Remember that; I simply was not interested in the Jedi recruiting my son."

He begins to peel a rangefruit and does not pause when I comment that Obi-wan has told me about a few distinctly recalled scoldings over the Enclave.

"Yes, yes," he says smoothly, "but that was when he went on his own. Obi was a good child; his mischiefs came more from curiosity or inattention than from selfishness. I never punished him severely; I never had to. But he would be remarkably obtuse about the Enclave! He didn't seem to hear a word I...it was as if he had decided the visits were good and therefore my opinion didn't exist!" He frowns. "Takes after his Alderaani uncle in that. Oh, Obi listened to Wreyn--sometimes--when she tried to offset what he overheard over the hill. She knew he was too young, simply too young. Sometimes I wonder why the Jedi didn't see that."

Now that Allyn Emarie's name has come up again, I feel free to direct the conversation a bit. I know what happened during Emarie's fateful visit the year before Hala, and I am anxious to hear the father's version. "His uncle has told me of visits..." I venture.

"Emarie?" He pours the cavine, a slightly tolerant smile on his face. "I suppose Emarie told you he opened the world of the Force to my son."

"Not exactly, but..."

"But close enough. His mother did that, and she did it properly. Obi knew what any educated child could be expected to know. Perhaps a little more, yes, but Wreyn and I both believed in the universality of the sentient bond. Call us dreamers, but our son believes in it too, and I am proud of him for it. Even if he took us literally."

"Yes, Wreyn and I agreed on Obi's education, remember that! Emarie is dead now. I have no wish to belie the man's memory, but I warn you, he was an arrogant man."

"But Obi-wan himself has told me how Emarie encouraged him."

"And I suppose Obi has told you that I kicked Emarie out of the home over that."

I stop spreading jam on my wafers; my expression is answer enough for him and he laughs.

"Well, Obi is wrong. A fruit? The tartness will offset your jam nicely, Ser Lorleyneesi."

"No, thank you; I like sweets. But, Obi-wan..."

"Ser Whill, I was abrupt with you yesterday. I apologize. I sometimes think of my son as perfect and it annoys me when I discover his memories are a bit less than that. His mother always warned me that he had a tendency to accept his opinion as the last word."

I bite into my wafer rather than speak.

"He'll learn, though. Yes, he is wrong about Emarie; Wreyn was the one who banished him. Obi was not quite seven when it happened; he was not made privy to all his parents' discussions."

He breaks some more wafers--these are plain and are very good, not commercial quality at all. "Emarie was here on another convalescence. I shouldn't have allowed that either, but Wreyn worried about the man. You see, Allyn was an intemperate man in battle; he tended to believe the common-folk tales that Jedi were invulnerable."

"I am certain a trained Jedi knows the risks he faces and--"

"And can be as foolish as anyone else, despite that knowledge. You Whills really ought to be a bit more accurate in your telling of those tales."

"Emarie came to stay with us just as Wreyn and I were off on our second fifth survey in '18. It's a long trip and I was loathe to leave the boy behind; we were missing too much of his childhood. We could have taken him with us; on the corp-yacht he would have had a couple of small children to play with. What? Of course I allow families among the crew and Company officers! This is a civilized company, Ser Whill."

"But Allyn insisted on attending the boy and as our Housemaster had an illness in his family, the timing was perfect."

He stops abruptly. Gazing out the window absently, he raises a hand to rub at his temple. "Timing," he murmurs. "Had you asked me about the timing any day during the next year, I would have insisted on the perfection of it." The rubbing stops and he cups his mug of cavine with both hands, his eyes bleak. "What happened



between Emarie and us seemed to have solved the Enclave problem, seemed to have given me the perfect reason for immersing Obi in the Company...but I suppose nothing is perfect in this universe, Lorleyneesi, not memories or solutions..."

\*

Ves, 6018.22.7

"We should have never left him here with the boy!" Kenobi's voice was an accusation, but as much at himself as at his wife. They had come back early. They were already unpacked, but still no one greeted them in the solarium. Kenobi knew--he just knew--where Obi and Allyn were. He stood at the glass doors and watched the small ingress which marked the beginning of the path to the Enclave beyond the hill. Wreyn sat by the stairs, her figure faintly reflected in the glass. Her face was still, almost solemn. Arde-wan recognized the stance; she was reaching out mentally for Obi-wan. Kenobi was a little disturbed by this. Wreyn had only used the skill within the house before; he wondered if she could actually reach to the Enclave or even the woods. He wondered why she expected a seven-year-old to pick up--

*"Then shout hurrah! for the bold Enclave!  
The Force forever flowing  
amidst the Jedi who shelter peace  
with sabers bright and glowing!"*

The voices carried easily in the still afternoon air. Kenobi saw the two singers seconds later, a muscular man in walking slacks and an open jacket, and a booted, tunicked boy astride his shoulders, waving a sturdy stick in dramatic emphasis to the song.

"They must not have heard the hovercraft to be dawdling so," Arde-wan commented.

"They are too absorbed in each other to sense anyone," his wife countered, her irritation surprising Kenobi. Wreyn sat forward then, her brow lowered ominously.

Arde-wan glanced back to the woods' edge. Obi-wan was on his own feet now, frozen in a posture of concentration. His frown eerily echoed Wreyn's for a moment, then disappeared in a gap-toothed grin. "It's Mem!" he shouted. "They came back early! Come on, Ta Allyn! I'll show her how I can pour the wine!"

Arde-wan heard Wreyn sigh as Obi-wan dashed up the slope. Emarie was still at the woods' edge, gazing skyward, a blank expression on his face. Then he nodded in recognition and looked after Obi-wan curiously. The boy was already through with parental hugs and dashing to the foodcenter for the wafers and wine when Allyn neared the solarium. He stopped, aware of Kenobi's displeasure. The two men quietly stared at each other until Obi-wan returned.

Arde-wan rolled the glass of wine between his palms and watched his son tear through the presents he and Wreyn had brought home. A year or two more for him to remain this way, he told himself; not long before he gets coltish. How quickly he has grown; how little I have seen of him.

In a corner of the room, Wreyn and Allyn were talking, their words rising every so often. They had been there since Obi-wan demonstrated how deft he was, pouring the welcome wine between two hands that did not quite touch the bottle. Wreyn had paled slightly--and Arde-wan had felt his haunting chill--then she and Allyn were off on their argument. Fortunately, Obi-wan had been easily distracted by the presents.

Still, Arde-wan was curious himself about the trick. "Did you go to the Enclave often, Obi?" he asked casually, taking a wrapping the boy tossed his way.

Obi-wan nodded, peering into a dark box. "Ta Allyn had lots of business and I went with him. What is this?"

"Look closer, but don't trip the black-out." It was obvious the boy assumed that visits to the Enclave with an adult fell under the same heading as visits with his classmates. Arde-wan didn't scold; he would save that for the boy's uncle.

Obi-wan found the presentation switch and the box unfolded, revealing a miniature factory complex, complete with a light-sensitive crystalizing bay. "You brought the mineral set!" he cried happily, his fingers scrambling over the layout, turning machinery and ore samples this way and that. "Does the crystalbreak really work?!"

"Yes, and make sure you don't hurt yourself with it, or your mother will have my hide." Speaking of his mother...Obi-wan continued to ply his father with questions, but Arde-wan's attention drifted. Wreyn and Allyn had left the room now, but he had heard enough of their discussion to know it was being continued elsewhere and that it concerned more than the wine bottle trick.

"Can I try it now, Per? Can I? Grandper gave me some c'pazes. Can I try the breaker on them?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes, yes. Go ahead. But do it in your playroom, and if you spill any fragments on the floor, I will have no sympathy for your splinters." The boy rushed off, barely hearing Kenobi's words. But it was no matter. Obi was a conscientious child. And he hated splinters.



"The fact is, Allyn, Arde does *not* want the boy bothering the Enclave and I expect you to respect my husband's wishes!"

"Wreyn, you are trying my patience! Or are you going to claim you don't know what I've heard about the boy at the Enclave? What I've seen myself? Sister, you are not that blind! Just because you chose to get married instead of accepting the challenge of the Order is no reason to deprive your son..."

"Not one more word on that subject, Allyn Emarie!"

"Wreyn, you would have him waste his talents just as you--"

"Enough, Jedi! You presume too much!"

Reluctant to interfere in what he knew to be a long-standing argument between Wreyn and Allyn, Arde-wan waited outside the study door. The reference to Obi-wan, the insinuation that Emarie thought he should be "trained", also stilled Kenobi's hand by the entry touch tone. For the first time, his odd feelings over the Jedi and his son began to take a form he could understand, and that this form did indeed mirror his grandper's despair over two dear and lost children made his fears almost too tangible to bear. Obi-wan was far too enamored of the Jedi; Emarie sounded far too eager. What a fool he was not to have recognized what his subconscious had been telling him for years!

More sharp words passed inside the study, then silence. Kenobi was about to enter when Emarie spoke, his voice a bit strained.

"All right, Wreyn, all right. I apologize for bringing it up."

"But you still think it."

"You know I do."

"It does not become you. All are valuable within the Force."

"But you had such promise! No, no, spare me another lecture! And let us get back to the point: my nephew, who has half the Enclave here entranced with his precocity, but whose parents refuse to see--"

"Whose uncle sees fit to show him skills beyond his age!"

"Oh, belay that Wreyn! He had that bottle trick nearly down when I came! He's watched at the Enclave; I dare say he's seen you do it."

"He has not, nor shall he. I would never endanger a child's perceptions by exposing him to skills beyond his capacity."

"How do you know what is beyond his capacity? I am the trained Jedi in this family, Wreyn!"

"And I am *not* blind, Allyn. And what I see in that boy must not be allowed to run wild--"

"You see with a parent's eye, sister. That boy is worthy of more than a common guide to the Force. My opinion is less biased than yours, Wreyn, and you cannot deny that."

"Why, by the gods' mountains, I can and I will, Allyn Emarie! You are arrogant, brother, to presume you are the fitting judge, and you will not toy with my son's future to satisfy that arrogance!"

"Nor will you sacrifice my only child to a cause that has taken too high a toll from this family already." Arde-wan closed the door behind himself. "This discussion is moot, Allyn. Obi-wan is heir to the allya's Company management; he will not be Sith fodder."

"Oh, yes. The infamous Kenobi twins," Allyn exclaimed, his hands on his hips, his derision obvious. "I've heard all about *your* version of that Gdnvue battle from Obi-wan. Fortunately, the boy hasn't seemed to have absorbed your paranoia, sir. It is *you* who are sacrificing Obi's future!" the Jedi insisted, pointing at Kenobi. "You, with your grandfather's memory of two children fifty years dead! You remind him of the dangers constantly. Can you not see your way to a small look at the strengths of the Order? Do I have nothing to say at all about my nephew's right to explore his talents? Is he to have no choice? No *choice*, Arde-wan?! Who are *you*, Arde-wan Kenobi, to deny him his *free choice*!?"

"I am the father of a child of seven!"

"Who should be taken in hand by his betters and not hindered by one who knows little about the ways of the Jedi!"

"Allyn!"

"I *am* his father, sir, and I will decide how or if he is to be hindered, and I further remind you, Allyn, that you are nothing but a Jedi, a *servant* of the universe, not its arbitrary judge!"

"Hinder him, Arde, and you will lose him and you will have no sympathy from me!"

"Allyn!" Wreyn repeated, storming across the room to stand before Emarie. "You will not speak to my husband so! Obi is also my son and you will respect that."

"Oh, I do, sister, I do. But if any accusations of despoiling the boy's inclinations toward business are to be handed out, it is you who are the prime suspect. My influence of a fifth is nothing compared to what you have taught him."

"I have contained him, Allyn! He is but a child!"

"And performing as you did at fifteen



with proper training. And if you should have been a Jedi, all the more so he!"

"I said not to mention that--"

"I shall continue to mention it so long as it bears upon my nephew's education!" Emarie jabbed his finger at Kenobi again. "His prejudices are irrelevant! Obi-wan was meant to be more than a mere bookkeeper's master!"

Crack! The slap was nearly as real to Arde-wan as it was to Allyn. He winced at the coldness in Wreyn's voice as she ordered Emarie from the house.

"OUT! And do not come back until you have learned the humility of your Order! Jedi, you are embarrassing!"

Kenobi almost felt sorry for Emarie, who paled at his sister's words. The Jedi's presumption had not really bothered Arde-wan, who was accustomed to eliteness and half-expected it in such as the Jedi. But Wreyn had no patience for it, and, in the end, her temper was far more deadly than Allyn's. As was her displeasure; a sister's disgust would always cut deeper than that of the simple husband and father of her child.

"Leave, immediately," she repeated, and he was gone.

Arde-wan started to speak to his wife, but Wreyn placed a hand on his arm to stay him. She was as pale as Allyn now; the muscles of her face were drawn and her face showed her pain.

"No, Arde, don't say anything. Allyn is foolish; I shouldn't let myself be drawn into...see that he goes, will you, love? No, don't look vindicated; my reasons are not yours, though I will honor yours so long as it is your decision to make. Do you understand?" She brought her other hand to Arde-wan's face. "I know you feel it, Arde, even if we call it by other names. The boy is special and we both worry about him. Allyn...does not know fear, not the subtler kind. He is a simple warrior. When his temper is upon him...Oh, Arde, there are such temptations in power. Sometimes, one must give up so much to evade them..." She stopped and stepped away. "Go, I need to be alone. It is too difficult to damp from both you and the boy. Especially the boy."

Wreyn's words repeated in Arde-wan's mind as he paced the halls to Emarie's room. He was not certain he understood her references at all. What could her reasons be if not...but she did agree with him on shielding Obi-wan from the temptation of the Jedi. That he knew, and it gave him strength to admit the danger the boy was in.

Obi-wan was too full of the Jedi at too impressionable an age. The longer he was exposed directly to them, the further he might be

dragged away from his future. Arde-wan had to protect him from that. The decision was made as Kenobi noted that a server-droid was already collecting Allyn's things in the Jedi's guest room: Obi-wan would travel with Arde and Wreyn from now on. He was old enough for the discipline of a tutor, and life aboard the *Serene Star* held plenty of excitement for a young boy. As the Prince Zakrefske had said, the place for an heir was by his father's side.

The uproar of a cityspeeder told Arde-wan that Allyn himself was leaving now. Kenobi stepped down the stairs, still thoughtful, planning the arrangements necessary for Obi to--

Notes played slowly on the grand multi-chord, and a child's voice stopped Arde-wan midstairs.

*"Then through the stars of Gánvue far  
did the Dark Lord's legions plunder.  
And pleading words by Republic heard  
brought the Jedi flying skyward."*

A deep voice joined the boy's then, singing the chorus heartily as Obi-wan played the tune with new inspiration. Arde-wan tightened his lips into a grim smile and headed for the solarium.

As if aware of Kenobi's approach, Emarie sped ahead to the song's last verse.

*"At last so few breached the ramparts new  
to beset the Dark Lord's glory.  
But none should grieve for the brave who  
sleep--"*

"Emarie!" Kenobi snapped from the entry. "You were told, 'Immediately'."

The Alderaani straightened, glanced once at Kenobi, then dropped a hand on his nephew's shoulder. "I have to go, Obi. Remember that last line though, will you? Grief should never cripple anyone. You don't understand now, but remember. For me."

"Now, Allyn."

The Jedi walked past Arde-wan, out of the solarium, muttering, "It's only a space ditty; he'll hear it anywhere he goes." But when the two men stood at the house entry, Emarie stopped, his demeanor subdued.

"We don't agree, Kenobi," he said with difficulty. "And I believe you are wrong. But... I spoke out of turn. And out of pride. I meant no dishonor to you. Wreyn..." He closed his eyes, visibly pained. "Wreyn is right, as are many others, when they say I...I am going. My thanks for your hospitality."

"Allyn..."

"Arde, be proud of the boy."



"I am, Allyn, I am."

Obi-wan was still at the multichord, playing random notes. He did not look up when his father sat on the long bench beside him.

"Well, Obi, this has been the last time you will have had to wait for Mem and me to come home. From now on, you'll fly with us and be tutored on ship. What do you think of that?"

A nod and more disparate notes from the instrument. Obi's face was too solemn for Arde-wan's taste.

"You heard us arguing."

Another nod. Then Obi-wan looked up. He reached out and toyed with the rayed medallion that hung on Kenobi's breast. "You were angry at Ta Allyn. About the Enclave."

If that were all he had absorbed from the afternoon's disagreement, Arde-wan was grateful.

"I like going to the Enclave, Per. The Jedi don't mind."

Kenobi stopped the small fingers that tugged at the chain and folded them firmly in his hand. The fingers were slim and long and only as big as a child's might be, yet somehow they seemed too young for the face that went with the slim body. "So old a profile," Wreyn had once described the boy. A cold breeze tickled Arde-wan's neck as he remembered Wreyn's other words that day. "Ende will outlive the three of us....Ende will outlive..."

"The Jedi are good people," Arde-wan said softly, shoving his fears out of his mind, telling himself the problem was taken care of, and softly kissing the pastel skin of his son's hand. "You must respect them even as I do, Obi. But their world and our world seldom overlap. Perhaps, one day, you will be a father and one of your children will be a Jedi. That will be a great honor. But now you must leave them to their business, as we are left to ours."

"But why were you yelling at Ta Allyn?"

"Because he was not leaving us to our business."

*The morning is growing bright with full day, but I say nothing, hoping he will continue, will go on to Hala and what happened there. I am certain of my theory now, though he has not seen it himself, even in the retelling of the past. I know what he fears; it was in the mother's words.*

*He is staring out the window again,*

*his thoughts distant. "We had a year then," he says to the flowering plants that line the windows. "A year before Hala. You'll have to ask Obi about that. I didn't understand then; I still don't. I am not a Jedi."*

"He doesn't remember everything, Ser Kenobi," I prompt.

"It was different after Hala. Oh, Wreyn, I failed you, but it was so very different then."

Hala, 6019.27.9 -- Mooncity

Arde-wan could faintly discern the belly of the *Serene Star*, orbiting silently above Mooncity Hangars in the morning sky. He stopped Obi-wan from some counting game the boy was conducting around and around a nearby mosaic pillar, and pointed the corp-yacht out to him. Obi-wan climbed onto a low wall leading from the local transfer crossing and peered into the sky. "If it were sunset," Kenobi explained, "you'd be able to see the family t'mark in the shadows of the structure. The beauty of the design is that it adapts to even the mechanics of a--"

"Arde?"

"Hmm? Yes, love?" Kenobi turned. Wreyn had finished her business with their secretary and was resettling her overdrapery about her shoulders. Her hair was particularly ashen that day, Kenobi noted approvingly, though still with the light cast of gold he found so appealing. She would be thirty that year, he realized, seeing in her face less of the girl she had been and more of the woman she was. To have had a daughter like Wreyn...Arde-wan scolded himself to dismiss the thought, reminding himself that Obi-wan was a time-filling experience as it was. There could be no use in wishing over what would not be.

"...and Yverane has my schedule for the rest of the day. Arde, you're not listening."

"Of course I am," Kenobi smiled. He nodded at Obi-wan who jumped off the wall to join his mother. "You'll check in periodically, too, love, won't you? I would like to leave early if they get the supplies loaded quickly. I'm anxious to hit Orca with the Farimbar skinsparklers."

"Well, don't be so anxious, husband," Wreyn teased as she straightened Obi-wan's tabard. "This is the first stop in weeks that I've had some free time; you've had three days off in that space."

"I have not," Kenobi countered playfully.

"I want to see the Parade of Banners, Per!"

"Hush, Obi," Wreyn admonished the boy.



"If there will be time for sightseeing, there will be time. But this is a supply stop and provisions come first."

"See," Arde-wan injected, "just what I said: business first."

"Oh, you." Wreyn stood on tip-toe to kiss her husband. "I'll link in on the half-measure, but don't expect me to hurry. All work and no play turns an Alderaani into a pinch-mouthed Agent."

"But, Mem, you said I could see the Banners!"

"Oh, along with you, you insistent boy!" Wreyn gestured toward the city center. "If you help me shop, we may make it to your Parade. Don't haggle too hard, dear."

"I won't, I won't." Kenobi watched them go, a graceful, full-figured woman with a slippery noodle of a boy who slid in and out between the legs of the aliens in the crowd. For a moment, appreciating the sway of his wife's full hips, still smelling her scent, Arde-wan considered calling out for them to stop, to wait for him. After all, it had been years since he had seen the Parade of Banners, that fluttering riot of world flags crowding the shores of an ancient mirror lake. But corporate duties called, and the *Serene Star* was on her journey leg home. The sooner he finished...besides, he reasoned, if he went, the boy would probably badger him for the story behind the placement of the Kenobi t'mark banner there, and Obi-wan did not need yet another Jedi tale. Kenobi sighed, signaled to his secretary and they left for the Port Authority Building.

\*

"Per was busy that morning," the Jedi Kenobi has told me, "so Mem and I went shopping. She was a bit cross with me, I remember that. Oh, I must have been showing off, or asking too many questions about subjects she deemed unsuitable. Mem was a strict woman in many ways. The year after Ta Allyn's visit was a difficult one for my lessons; Mem did not encourage me in the skills he had shown me, or in what I had seen done at the Enclave. 'If there will be a time for that, Obi,' she would say, 'there will be time. But not yet.' Hmf. Now that I think on it, I've always hated the phrase, 'not yet': give me a definite date, an approximate date if you must, but don't just say 'not yet' to me. Funny; I have always thought it was my old teacher who taught me such impatience. He--

"Hmmm? Yes, yes, back to Hala. I can tell you about the day...but not the night. I don't remember the night, Lorley. I...have never wanted to.

"We were going to break the midday with some brokers--a boring prospect, really,

but Mem was a businessess--until I spotted a sign for the Parade of Banners and cajoled Mem into taking me there. Well, looking back at it, I suppose I carried on a bit about it. We bought some fruit and cheese and a cloth runner to sit on. It was a bright day, I recall that. Not many other humans around. Mem let me lay my head on her lap while she prepared the food. I thought it was childish of me--at all of eight!--but sitting there, surrounded by Halites, made me think of how soft Mem was and how small I was. She was Alderaani, and comfortable to lean against, not like Per who was thin and boney. She wasn't much taller than...I digress. It was a pleasant lunch. Mem enjoyed it as much as I did, I am certain, for I remember her answering all my questions about the banners..."

\*

"And why is the Sith flag there?"

Wreyn sliced another piece of cheese, then looked up from their picnic spot on the Parade lawn to squint at the black and silver banner that fluttered at the south arc of the lake, one point of a pentagram of flags that stood separate from the rest. "Because Xet is one of the five homeworlds that nurtured civilization after the RingWorlds fell. You know that story, Obi."

"But the Dark Lords always cause wars. Why are they honored?"

"It is Xet that is honored. Obi, and her people, who remembered the Force when space turned lifeless about them. The Sith have always been a strong, aggressive people. They...Obi, it is a complicated history and you will learn more about it one day."

The boy made a face of childish intolerance and pointed out another flag. "Why is our t'mark flying over there?"

"I don't know." Wreyn thought a moment, then went back to preparing lunch. "Your father has never told me that story, Obi. All I know is that it is a fairly old honor, dating back to the Merchant's League."

Obi-wan jumped up. "I'll bet it was a Jedi who saved a whole world," he shouted, gesturing dramatically. "Maybe a whole system of worlds!"

"Obi, sit down. It was more likely a Kenobi merchant who saved a world economy through some judicious bargaining."

"Oh, sun, you take all the fun out of it. Just like Per."

"Your father is concerned about your over-enthusiasm for some things, Obi-wan. I am also."



Chastened, Obi-wan fiddled with his fruit until, "Were there many Jedi in the allya Kenobi then, Mem?"

"Oh, Obi...there were a few as always. You're a stubborn rascal with a sub...c, aren't you?" She reached out to rub her son's shoulders, but he hunched his back as if to edge away from her. "Oh, so we're getting too big for Mem to touch when she wants, are we? We'll see about that! Ha! Gotcha!"

Wreyn's hand spidered over her son's wiry body, tickling here, there, and everywhere. Obi-wan squealed, then laughed, then squealed again when his mother wouldn't stop. They both fell back on the soft fuzzgrass that sloped to the lake.

"Ha," his mother challenged, "I thought you said you could stand up to tickling now."

"I can, I can," Obi-wan managed to claim between giggles. He concentrated, then relaxed, and Wreyn's hands slid over unresponsive skin. She stopped, sat back on her heels, and studied Obi-wan.

"Not bad, but can you maintain it? I am determined, Master Kenobi."

Obi-wan nodded.

"We'll see."

Wreyn renewed her attack. Her son held firm at first, then wavered, letting loose a muffled giggle or two, but it was not until he let his attention be captured by his mother's eyes that his defense broke completely.

"No fair! No fair!" he yelled, scrambling to his feet. He stood before his mother, hands on hips, legs spread out, his face angry. "You turned it off!"

Wreyn cocked her head and said nothing. Obi-wan knew the look; she would not answer him until his temper had passed. But he was *very* angry. Determined to force his view, he turned away and stomped over to the nearest banner pole.

After a few seconds of leaning against the crystalline pole, arms crossed, brows frowning, Obi-wan glanced over his shoulder to see if his displeasure had had any effect on his mother. Wreyn, calmly peeling a rangefruit, did not look up. No matter how many times Obi-wan looked away, then looked back again, his mother remained busy with lunch. Finally, he turned completely about the pole so he was facing her, so she could fully appreciate his anger--should she look up again.

A graceful pteral arced over the Bannerground, its large wings shadowing the picnic runner, causing Wreyn to look up sharply. Obi-wan laughed to himself to see his mother so startled by a bird, but then she glanced down at the mirror waters of the lake and fixed her gaze there with an intensity that caused Obi-wan to straighten. He followed Wreyn's line of sight,

even looked all about the lake for what could so capture her attention. All he saw on the shores were Halites and other visiting races; in the sky, the desecrating artificial starettes the Halites used to maintain eternal day in Moonscity were just dawning.

He called out to his mother, but she didn't seem to hear; he reached out mentally, but spoke to the nothingness that was his mother's barrier against intrusion. Worried now, Obi-wan hurried to the runner. His uncle had told him that his mem could sometimes see things that were not yet, and that he should be alert at such times. And the Jedi at the Enclave at home had told him to always pay attention to this mother.

"Obi-wan," Wreyn said sharply to her son as he skidded to kneel beside her. "Did you see that?"

"See what, Mem?"

"That shadow on the water, across the Bannerground."

"It was only a bird, Mem."

"No, not the bird, there! Again!"

"No, Mem, I saw nothing."

She sat up suddenly, gathering her bags and her son to her side. "Come, Obi, I think we had better return to the hangar." She took Obi-wan's hand and would not let loose of him despite his protests.

"Mem, let go. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Obi..." She glanced back at the lake. Obi-wan did too, but all he could see were the people, the water, the banners, and the starettes. "Probably nothing but my imagination, but I shall call your father, anyway."

"Mem," Obi-wan started, wary of the odd tone in his mother's voice, "Ta Allyn said you could--"

"Ta Allyn told you a lot of things he should not have." Her voice was more normal now, if rushed. Obi-wan relaxed despite the way she hurried him up the slope to the city ways.

"But if what Ta Allyn said is--"

"You are too young, Obi-wan. Don't argue. For example, I did not 'turn off' your control back there. A person doesn't reach in and 'turn off' anybody."

"Ta Allyn says the Jedi--"

She stopped, dropped to one knee, and pulled Obi-wan toward her, taking both his upper arms in a firm grip. "Now listen to me, young man. I know that Ta Allyn also told you that such actions are a grievous business that no proper being enters into lightly and without dire responsibility. Do you think I would take such action against my own son? No. Don't give me that baby-



innocent look, Obi-wan. You are insistent about things better left unsaid; if you are going to know they exist, then you are going to know their darksides." Obi-wan dropped his head a bit, terribly uneasy with the turn of conversation. His mother was using words he had overheard at the Enclave, words that had frightened him then, too. Wreyn's voice became more determined. "You must not treat these talents of yours as games, Obi..." She looked up, her eyes seeing something Obi-wan could not, and gasped. "Oh, by the gods...Obi-wan, Obi, my starfire, remember this." She looked directly at Obi-wan now, lifting his chin so his eyes met hers. "Remember: you stopped yourself. You lost your ability because you turned your attention away from yourself. You were more concerned with my reaction, with what I was doing...gods help me, but I think you were trying to stop me instead of just maintaining your insensitivity."

Obi-wan was confused now, trying to remember what he had done, certain he would never have done anything to so upset his mother. "Mem, I..."

"No, be quiet. Listen. You cannot control what is about you, if you must do such at all, if you are not in control of yourself. And when you are in control of yourself, truly understanding what you do, you will only interfere with others in utmost necessity. Obi-wan, if you remember nothing else I have taught you, remember to be wary of your talents. You are so young to have..." She took his head in her hands, running her fingers through his fine hair. "Oh, Obi, sometimes the powers are too strong. Sometimes, you have to leave the baubles and the glory and put aside...yes, dear, I know you don't understand what I'm saying. Promise me, Obi, that you won't hurt anyone. Promise me that you'll always be afraid of the dark, that you'll remember someone was afraid for you."

She hugged him then, hugged him and squeezed him, and only his own fear at her strange words and the terror he felt in her mind kept Obi-wan from crying out at the strength in his mother's arms. Then the contact was broken and Wreyn was looking skyward, searching the clouds. As he followed her gaze, the first flash appeared in the blue, the first whine of atmosphere through airvents designed to scream at a fighter's prey reached the suddenly paralyzed crowds around them. Whatever her foresight had shown her, Wreyn Emarie, too, stood frozen a second, a heart-beat. Then the sky lit with more than the sun and starlettes, and the Sith Raiders were upon them.

No warning!

"Why wasn't there any warning? And why Hala, neutral and untouchable for millennia?" called out hundreds of voices, from a Vessan corporate director to an Aguent sales-agent to the Onagan smuggling captain who preyed

off both their companies' merchant ships. But there was no explanation from a Port Authority that had never had a need for protection, and in the confusion of the attack, none could be found. Kenobi ran with the rest, away from the flaming hangars, away from the targets of Sith destruction, away from the landing points of the Sith ships with their crews, hungry for plunder and captives.

There was a message on Kenobi's private link, but he heard no more than Wreyn's anxious call of his name and her mention of a street, the park. Shipfire tore through the building he and his secretary huddled in, throwing them to the side with the broken walls and furniture. The Omnan fell beside Arde-wan, the link destroyed with his hand. Kenobi heard the explosions resound in his head as he tore his tunic across from three side slit and bandaged the mangled lavender flesh, cursing the profusion of indigo blood that covered them both, then holding Yverane close until the Omnan lost consciousness. Energy fire and explosions were constant about them. Kenobi piled the debris into a shelter for his secretary, promised the unhearing ears that he would return, and wished Yverane fortune. Then he left.

However Way, Wreyn had said, near the Parade. They had made it to the Parade; Obi-wan had seen his Banners. Kenobi thanked the Father that his son had gotten his treat before the skies had exploded with Sith ships, and he prayed to all the gods he knew that he might reach his child and wife before the ground trembled about them with the terror of Sith troops.

For fourteen years, the Dark Lord Vert Darmen had led his space troops in a bloody incursion. That the hundred galactic years that had passed since the last Sith Raids had diminished the threat of Xet's hordes to the Center-Worlds meant little to those plundered worlds and satellites which felt the Dark Lord's wrath. The fact that no reach of the Incursion held a system long against the Jedi and Republican forces did little to diminish the Dark Lord's zeal. Vert Darmen was a desperate man, lord of a dying planet, ruler of a people bred for war who would wage it against their own if not against others, inheritor of a history that was glorious, but growing ancient in that glory. Once, in the early generations, Xet had ruled the galaxy with the other HomeWorlds, and even when the Jedi secured their ascendancy at the cost of Sith influence, Xet still ruled its space through the power of its people. Governments within the Republic rose and fell, yet Xet maintained its empire of regional vassals, and when the Merchant's League fell, the Dark Lords were ready to redeem their ancient mastery. The Sith Empire spread wide and richly across CenterWorld space, even into Far Sector. Om itself trembled in fear at a Dark Lord's might. Obeisance was paid on a hundred worlds, riches and goods blanketed Xet's cooling lands, and the Jedi were hard pressed to stop the silver and black tide of Sith influence.



But the years passed, and the final conquests were never made. Xet was dying, victim at last to the unseen wounds the fall of the RingWorlds had rained upon its civilisation; its strength was freezing, tumbling into sleep beneath the growing ice.

More and more time passed between the Incursions as the Jedi prevailed. The ephemeral borders of space drifted away. A Darman Lord rallied to a traitor's request from Gdnvue Region, then betrayed the betrayer, and led raiders through those stars, pillaging until the Jedi stopped his ships, and the Jedi stopped his troops, and the Jedi imposed a humiliating peace. Jedi! Vert Darman cursed when he sat on his cousin's throne. Usurpers of the Force, deniers of Xet's sole claim to the heritage saved from the days when history died and the RingWorlds fell and the galaxy knew darkness once again. Jedi! Mongrels who dallied with power. Power that once again must be Xet's, Darman had declared when his people demanded relief from the cold hell their world was becoming, when his people rose up against themselves in frustration. To war again, then, he had rallied them, and damn the Republic's offers of charity, and damn the Jedi's plan for relocation! If Xet must die--and not even the Dark Lord could deny that coming doom--then it would die in triumph, not abandonment, and her people would go as conquerors, not refugees. His were a proud people: stalkers, not prey; victors, not vanquished.

And so for fourteen years he had waged war on the Republic, and though it was said his nobles spoke against him and his growing weakness--the Renagz, the Vaders, the Xtoryms--still they fought with the cunning of their kind. Only the Jedi saw the downward turn, only the Jedi saw the ending of these years.

"Mem! Where are you? MEM!!" A slender boy stood shakily atop a low, smoking wall of rubble and shouted for his mother once again. "Mem!" Obi-wan called, reaching out with his mind for the cool touch that was Wreyn Emarie. But the noises were too loud around him, and the air seemed thick with thoughts he could not read, with pain and panic. He was confused; he was bruised, and much of the panic was his own. Then something formed clearly in his mind. "Mem?" The thin voice questioned as watery eyes searched beyond the splintered trunk of a planting the boy called a tree. It came again. No, not his mother, but familiar all the same. A presence, a movement along the Force, very strong, very like the eddies of power he felt swirling around the Enclave back home.

Almost too strong, and he hesitated to follow it, but it came again, a command that overrode his indecision, ignored his fears. He sat down on the rubble, looking desperately around for an adult to run to. But he had lost his Mem. There was no one with him except the presence in his mind, the touch so familiar yet so strange. He slid down the debris to the

street, his torn halbard catching on a sharp edge, ripping further, his dark slacks streaked with dust.

He followed the call he felt, flinching from the sounds of destruction around him. Where was Mem? That other noise had been deafening, and he had run from the falling walls and from the huge sithdozer that had trembled the ground as it relentlessly advanced, leveling what the raiders could not plunder. He had run, and more noises had torn at him, and then he didn't remember what had happened, but his head and his right leg were sore, and his hands hurt and bled from splinters and gravel.

Obi-wan turned a corner and shrank back from the dead. A massive arm, bleeding and broken clawed, reached out from the body of a Halite. He inched past the corpse, its broken seeming to follow his moves. Carefully, slowly, Obi-wan backed up some stairs that climbed aside a ragged wall. The shock of the dead reptilian faded in the growing circle of power that filled the area, and Obi-wan stopped on a backless landing. He lay forward, on his belly, and peered over the wall into the open space below, at the men in black armor, at the one man who had called him here.

They were all tall, but it was the man in the grim black helmet and the silvery crest that commanded Obi-wan's attention. He stared wide-eyed at them and listened to the forbidding Sith captain, to the voice that felt so strong. The words the man used were Sithian; Obi-wan reached out to Read in a way he could understand...

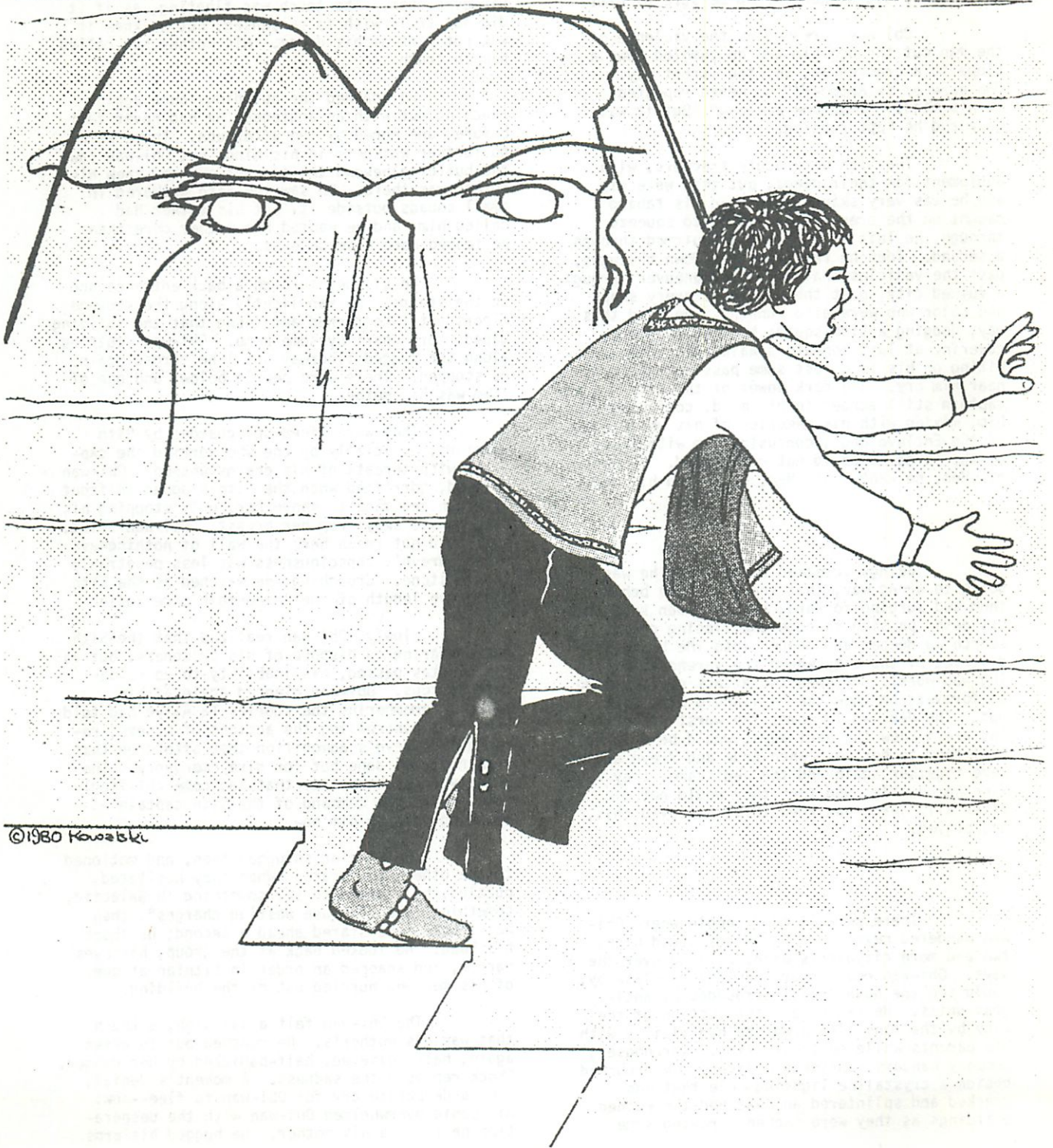
The black helmet snapped about and Obi-wan recoiled in a wash of pain such as he had never felt before, too stunned to cry out. He crouched flat on the landing, still seeing the flame-red eyes in the shadow of the helmet, hearing a call for recognition that further tormented him when he resisted.

Where are you? Obi-wan crawled back as if to evade the thought, but try as he might, he could not blank his mind. This was no petty crisis at home when one wanted to hide from parents after some mischief; the image of the black figure with the pale face and burning eyes would not leave him, and his control would not hold. He shrank closer to the open edge of the stairs, hoping, pretending, the man could not see him...

"Mem!" he cried out in anguish, stumbling to his feet as if to run down the stairs, but the Sith captain had found him. He looked again at the man--he could not have stopped himself had he tried--and then he could not move. His legs would not obey him, but stayed still at the command in his mind. Tears came to his eyes and rolled down his dirty cheeks; he trembled with fear and the helplessness of his resistance.

The Sith took a step forward, then stopped. Obi-wan felt the command waver in the man's surprise. A boy? The break was slight, a passing notice, but the tension in Obi-wan's body





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found release and he fell down a step, then two, free again.

Anger flowed after him. He heard Sithian words in his mind—ear clear as Galactic, but they passed through him and he was blind to all but his need to run.

"Get that boy!" the harsh voice shouted. "I'll be damned if I let some Jedi's brat scurry out of here! And be sure of him!"

Obi-wan screamed as the violence of the man cut through him and he tumbled down a slope to a cracked and shifted street way. "Be sure of it Reiddaf!" he heard repeated in his mind. "That one Feels—" But it was gone and he kept running.

The Sith were acute trackers, with equipment for their needs, but they were big and he was very skinny, and when his tabard caught on the crevasse he wanted to squeeze through, he left it behind and squirmed through a second. Then he ran and ran. Down the ways, past the vehicles that tried to maneuver through a ruined city, past the people of every shape and color who were also running. He fled this way, dodging a Sith squad; he fled that way, cowering at last beneath a walkway bridge, biting on his fist lest some passing warrior hear him cry. The dark power of the Sith captain still echoed in his mind, confusing him, mixing with his memories of his uncle, of the Enclave Jedi, confusing him with a use of the Force he could not comprehend. He wanted his Mem, he wanted his Mem, he wanted his Mem...

Beings screamed at him that he was going to wrong way, that the Sith were behind them and surging forward, but Arde-wan kept to his path, passing through the fleeing crowds, searching deeper and deeper into the business district of the city where the warehouse pillaging was worst. He knew the attack could not go on forever; he knew the call would have gone out. The Jedi would come; the worst was over. And Wreyn knew the Jedi ways, would be able to call them to her; and when Arde and Wreyn and Obi were together again and the Jedi came, they would find her easily, and then they would not die after all. Arde-wan knew this, believed this, and prayed.

There weren't many people where Obi-wan wandered next. The buildings stood high, two and more cityblocks each, arching over the ways. Obi-wan could hear the 'dozers close by, could see the hovercraft surrounded by anti-grav units. He recognized the section of the city by the many like areas he had visited with his parents while on their trips. Warehouses, company hangars, business offices. He crouched beside a crystalline lighting pole that was cracked and splintered and watched the ruined buildings as they were sacked, drawing some

sense of comfort from the familiarity of his surroundings.

He dozed and dreamed of his mother. She was calling him home; it was dark and she was worried and he had been late coming home from a furtive visit to the Enclave. She called and she called and she didn't hear him answering...

Obi-wan blinked and looked up, alert, his eyes open. The touch was fleeting, as if it did not truly wish to be sensed, but he knew it was not part of his dream. His mother had called him in truth.

He scanned the buildings once again, reaching out with an acuteness he had never felt before, one honed by the afternoon. There were no further whispers in his mind, but Obi-wan saw the building beyond the closest one and knew his mother was there. He saw the Sith gathered in small squads outside it, but his mother had called him, and he wanted his mother more than he feared more crimson eyes.

He slipped through a back entrance and up the stairs. He ran lightly along the storage floors until he turned and found that the building gaped, torn apart by some bomb. Obi-wan scuttled along the ragged floorway until he turned again. He stopped. There were people below, and one of them was his mother.

They were lined up, guarded by Sith warriors, especially by one who worried the captives with threats of his energy weapon. Obi-wan watched, horrified when the Sith stopped in front of Wreyn and made to shove her, only stopping his hand centis away from her breast. Obi-wan tried, but could not reach her; the wall of nothingness around Wreyn's consciousness was less penetrable than a stone. Crouching, he watched as the Sith paced the length of the commonfolk once again.

Slowly, Obi-wan realized that the Sith was preparing to dispose of his prisoners, but as the minutes passed, his inability to do so became obvious. Obi-wan glanced again at his mother, remembering the stories Ta Allyn had told him about controlling the actions of others, remembering Wreyn's admonition that afternoon that such never be done but for dire emergency. The reality of such ability that had come chillingly to him with the command of the Sith captain was piercing cold to him now.

The warrior shrugged then, and motioned to the others to vacate. When they hesitated, puzzled, he started to say something in Galactic, something like, "No use wasting charges", then he stopped. He stared ahead a second; he shook his head. He looked back at the group, his eyes narrow, and snapped an order in Sithian at one of his men who hurried out of the building.

The Obi-wan felt a sad sigh, a touch that was his mother's. He reached out to Wreyn again, half-relieved, half-panicked by her danger. Shock replaced the sadness. A moment's denial, then a desperate cry for Obi-wan to flee—now! His panic overwhelmed Obi-wan with the desperation he felt in his mother. He hugged his arms



around his knees, and rocked, crying to his Mem as babies do before they talk. Only the sharpest pang he had ever felt from his mother stilled him and he swallowed deeply at the ache it produced.

"Listen to me, Obi," she told him.  
"Run, run! They will not bother a small boy!  
Run, my starfire, find your father!"

The Sith captain and his deadly command filled Obi-wan's mind, and he heard his mother gasp at the memory. "Even a small boy...he knows, he sees it too...Obi-wan," her voice was different now, as commanding as the other's had been, but calming where his had brought fear. "Obi-wan, listen to me: you must be nothing. You must disappear and be no thought that they can reach. You must remember everything you have seen at the Enclave and with your Ta Allyn. You must not let them distract your control. Obi-wan..." The sternness broke; she was distracted. "Now, Obi-wan! You are my great starfire and I love you and the Force knows what will become of you but I--Fly, Obi-wan! You are more of the Force than these can ever be! Fly! You have the power to defy all of them. Now, Obi! And remember what you promised me!"

Her persuasion was so skilled that Obi-wan was practically at the first turn without knowing it. But then the wall of nothingness fell with a finality that paralyzed him. From the shadows of the broken floor, he watched a dark caped figure stride into the building.

The Sith captain stopped five Xet paces from the captives and spread an inquiring web of power over the room. "Who is here," it asked; "who dares to use these powers against me and mine?" He glanced up, to the shadows above. "That's one," Obi-wan heard. Then the man regarded the prisoners. The question became more specific: "Who tampers with the orders I have given my men?" Each face was examined; each aura tested. And when he came to the Alderaan woman, he stopped.

She did not look back at the Sith, not directly. Obi-wan knew the expression, had seen his mother use it on unpleasant persons, on folk she had no regard for. Then she changed, and though she still did not meet the red eyes, Obi-wan knew she had lost control of her indifference. Her face softened; her head bobbed ever so slightly. Then the full force of the Sith hit, cracking like a slap. Wreyn cried out and bent double, bringing her hands to her face, hiding the distortion of pain.

Obi-wan watched, frozen in position by his isolation, dimly realizing what his aloneness meant. "Dulac," the Sith captain called to the soldier who had been in charge of the commonfolk. "Come here. You see this woman? She is a fool who used the Art against you. Remember the feeling and do not be caught by such Jedi tricks again. You, woman." He raised a hand and Wreyn straightened, her resistance showing along the muscles of her neck, in the sweat that showed on her dress. "Yes, look up, witch, that you may know the greater powers

of the Sith. You cannot prevail against me; your talents are good for tricks, nothing more. And I will not abide such as you to despoil my victory in this raid." He loosened his energy pistol and raised it. Obi-wan longed to reach out and strike it from his hand but all that he was was as immobile as his body. "When she is dead, Dulac," he heard the captain say, "you shall be free to kill the others."

Elation soared through Obi-wan at the man's words. He had as much as admitted that Wreyn still wielded power over the soldier! If she did, then she was faking! He would not hurt her! He could not--

The captain fired.

"MEM!" the boy shrieked, jerking forward in sudden freedom. The Sith swung around. He shot with deadly aim at the ruined floors above him. The energy bolt stung the wall beside Obi-wan, sparking his face and neck, drawing a second scream from him, driving him back around the corner, into the darkness of the upper story. Again, the harsh words raced after him.

"Get that boy! I don't care if you blast the building down to do it! Where's Reiddef? I'll have his head for this! I want that woman's brat! Get that boy!"

Kenobi leaned against a wall, slid to his heels in weariness, and rested a few minutes. He was no warrior, and no athlete; avoiding the Sith and the crumbling shells of buildings had exhausted him. His lungs rattled from the exertion, from the dust, the smoke, and the acrid pollution of chemicals let loose in the air by intention and by fire. The artificial suns were past their zenith; the star itself had set; Moonscity was awash in the glow of battle. "Where are the Jedi," Kenobi wondered dully, knowing now that the question was futile. Darmen would not have dared an attack on such as Hala were protection readily available. To strike a hal-  
lowed place, to defy the millennia of peace the Banners represented, was an act of defiance that must be a total victory to be most effective. The humiliation had to be complete; Darmen's contempt for the Republic had to be expressed without doubt.

No Jedi. Kenobi rested his elbows on his knees and hung his head. He was not going to find Wreyn. He knew it, and there would be no one to lead him to her side. He would be only one more refugee when it was over, lost, hurt, and grieving.

Obi-wan watched the soldiers line up the disrupters, aiming them at the support points of the building he was in. There were warriors everywhere now, even along the side of the building where a four-lane archway had connected it with the warehouse on the next block. All that



was left of the other building was a front wall and panels of split siding. Black-armored Sith stood on the remains of the archway, blocking Obi-wan's escape.

He was trapped. He couldn't get out. They would blow up the building and he would die. Like Mem. Like the Halites. He hugged his arms around his chest to still his shaking. The captain wanted him dead. Like Mem. Like Mem...

He could still feel his mother's touch, the Sith's angry jab. He brought his hands to his eyes and rubbed till it hurt, trying to wipe out the images, to push out the reverberations of those extrasensory communications he had shared. But he had internalized them, and they had internalized him, capturing him in those resonant depths where there are no corporeal distinctions. When Obi-wan looked out at the Sith soldiers again, he felt as if he were here but not here, maybe beyond them, maybe with them, maybe not. That which was, in which were the disciplines of his mother's lessons, the exhilaration of the Enclave, the power of the Sith captain, was all about him. And the more he became part of that other existence, the less frightened he became. Mem...the Sith... his own perceptions were all of one whole, and if that whole appeared to him in the concepts a child could understand, nevertheless, the power was real. Obi-wan slumped against a wall, tired, but alert; he slid down on his heels and he thought.

The captain wanted him dead, like Mem, and he was just a child... Obi-wan looked down, frowning slightly. But Mem had fooled the captain. Mem had been stronger in some ways, even the captain had admitted it. *"When she is dead, you will be free to kill the others."* Mem had to die...but she wasn't even a Jedi! *"You are more of the Force than these can ever be. You must be nothing, Obi-wan...you must remember...Ta Allyn..."* Obi-wan did remember, remembered his uncle saying that the Sith ultimately lost, foiling themselves, because they used the lesser powers of the Force to command the greater Force. Obi-wan hadn't known what Ta Allyn meant then; he still wasn't sure, but he thought it meant the Sith made mistakes. That they could be fooled. And Mem had told him he could...*"You must be nothing...you must disappear..."* His mem had said he could fool them too. She had told him to do what they did at the Enclave, what Ta Allyn could do. She had told him he *could*, he realized, his spirits rising. She had, she had!

He would have to tell Ta Allyn. Ta Allyn would be happy to hear that. Obi-wan stood once again, the wisps of memory swirling through his mind as he searched for an idea. He could do anything he wanted; Mem had said so. And he had to get out to tell Ta Allyn. And Per, he had to tell Per. Per would listen to what Mem had said.

*"Remember, Obi-wan, disappear. Be nothing...do not let them distract your control..."*

Obi-wan scurried from opening to opening

in the crumbling building, watching the soldiers with eyes that strained to see as the Jedi saw. Relax and open yourself, his Ta Allyn had told him. He was so immersed in his play of memories that the exercise came easily and the power swelled within him, making him light and oh, so silent. None saw him as he dashed across open spaces to the end of the west wall.

Here the warriors were not so close together and here the wind was blowing from cross streets, raising distswirls between the sentinels.

A moment's doubt threatened his concentration. What did he do now?! There were soldiers everywhere and they would... *"Disappear...be nothing..."* He remembered. He had seen it done at the Enclave. He had seen Ta Allyn do it. And his mem said he could do it, too.

Obi-wan dropped his arms to his side and stood, one small tremor in a greater force, in the shadow of the doorway. It was a game, like one he had played ever since he could remember. Slowly, he withdrew from his body. The sensations in his feet and hands faded; in his legs and his arms. The numbness spread, more quickly then. When it reached his neck muscles, his skull, his face, he lifted a hand to test the nothingness he had become. Ghostlike, he smiled and the hand drifted back down. He had never gone so far before, but he was certain he had it right. The building seemed very distant around him now. It had fallen away soundlessly into the void, its mass unimportant to his existence. He stepped out, taking his darkness into the alleyway. From far away he saw a soldier begin to turn his way. But the soldier was not there for him. He would not see him or think of him. Soldier? What soldier? There was nothing, nothing there and he was thinner than a mistwhisp, less touchable than a dustwhirl dancing across the alley. He was nothing, nothing at all, and he was everything, every part of an energy that drew him on and was more real than a mistwhisp, a dustwhirl, a small and awed boy could endure...

It was dangerous to cut through the buildings; lower floors gaped open to the light; footing was unsteady. But it was dangerous on the ways and streets, too. Kenobi preferred the threat of falling walls to being killed, or taken for ransom, by the Sith. The skies had been quiet for a measure, but now a rumble rolled across the city, stopping Arde-wan from scrambling over some wallboard to the storefront of the present building. He scanned the skies, his eyes automatically turning to that area of space where the *Serene Star* was docked. In the light of the setting sun he was sure he could see her t'mark, as well as the dark shadows of loading barges where there should have been none. A flash brightened the yacht's bow; then another. And from the moon-south, a formation of wing-shaped reflections roared across the high heavens to the Kenobi ship. Arde-wan leaned



back and exhaled slowly. They had come! Republican or Jedi; he didn't know which, but help had come at last.

Anxious to get to where the new forces would land--if there were Jedi, Wreyn would be there--Kenobi climbed to the edge of the store front, then shrank back. Sith were lined about the building across the way, ready to level it with disruptors. He thought about climbing back down, but that might make noise, might attract attention. The uneasy looks the soldiers gave the rumbling skies told Kenobi that they would be doubly alert. He slid down the wall to sit, resting his back against the boards, his buttocks on his heels. He was tired, but willing to wait. Help was here; the long day would be ending. Soon he and Wreyn and Obi would be together.

He scanned the building front. A motion caught his eye at a lower left doorway. A small being stepped again into the alleyway. It paused as a flutterby might, then walked into the scattered ruins. Its steps were fluid and purposeful, if oddly rhythmical, too perfect as it were, like a droid without the perception of the world around it to distract it from its mission. Wind-blown dust obscured the figure in its next steps, then cleared as it reached the midpoint between two warriors of the cordon.

Wallboard crackled in Kenobi's grip. He recognized the dirty grey undersweater, the flyaway hair, the slender face under the bruises and soot. A tremor of helplessness coursed through Arde-wan, then dread, as he recognized what was happening. "*Obi-wan could not be...*" but the boy kept walking, his face still, his eyes looking ahead with a serenity beyond his experience. The soldiers stirred once, when the boy passed through their direct line of sight, as if sensing something was amiss, and Kenobi swore they should hear the pounding of his heart. But they did not seem to see the child, though they glanced at each other.

A shadow swept the alley, a ship screaming through its vents in protest at the silver wedge that spun lazily, surely, behind it. The Sith looked up, one gesturing angrily at the Jedi ship, and still Obi-wan walked. He was past the alley, stepping onto the wide walk. The small face seemed strained now, or was it Arde-wan's imagination? He knew what his son was doing and he knew Obi-wan was too young--Father! He was totally untrained in such things, whatever his age!--to hold long. The boy hesitated; the soldiers would see him and... Oh sweet Father, protect us, he's holding true! Arde-wan's breath grew shorter with a new fear. No, he corrected himself, it was old, four years old and more. "*Obi-wan...he can do this thing...*"

The boy was undeniably tiring now. His arms hung loosely, his eyelids lowered. "*But he is still a little boy...*"

"Obi-wan!" Arde-wan hissed into the dust. "Obi," he pleaded, "over here!"

The small body paused, a slight recognition in the eyes. Then it was gone, blanked out, lost in a vacuum even Kenobi could feel filling the air about them. Obi-wan turned slightly, and walked in the direction of his father.

Kenobi did not know he could wait so patiently. With deliberate, cautious steps, his son climbed through the empty window space. Terrified of breaking the spell and betraying them both, Arde-wan did not reach out until Obi-wan had stepped out of sight. Then, with a fierce embrace that brought a weak cry from the boy, the father held his son to his breast, whispering his name over and over again.

"Per?" The voice was thin. Alarmed by the desperation he heard, Arde-wan cradled Obi-wan, pushing the damp hair from his face. "Per?!" Higher now, and distant, and Kenobi saw dark vastnesses in the eyes that were not focused on him.

"I'm here, Obi, I'm here. Hush, baby, hush."

"Per!" And there was no mistaking the distress, the panic. The boy reached out blindly, then stiffened. A deep breath rose in his chest, then the slender fingers clenched at air and the heavy head fell back.

"Obi!" Arde-wan's lowered voice was a harsh growl as behind them the disruptors wailed. "Obi!!" Kenobi screamed, his cry lost in the energies' reverberations, his hands feeling frantically over his son's body, searching for life.

A rattling shudder calmed him, but the boy did not wake. Unconscious, Kenobi told himself, lying, for he knew this state was more than that. Caught by unfamiliar forces, he clutched the boy to him and fought a different kind of helpless, despair.

"*Wreyn! What do I do now?! Where are you?!*" he screamed in his mind, his spirit trembling even as his body did. "*I'm scared, Wreyn! How did he...where is he now...what do I do?!*"

"Oh, Father," Kenobi muttered, bowing his head to kiss the dusty head, "let him live, let him live." A glance about told him the Sith were gone. Jerkily, he got to his feet. He would not think of his fear...of his son...of the Sith. He stepped down out of the window onto the walk. The soldiers were gone; the Jedi were near. He would have to get back to his ship. Wreyn would head back that way, and Wreyn would know what to do for his boy. "*Something has to be done; this must not happen again. He is too young to be able to...he must not have to...the Jedi...Obi-wan...*" The thoughts raced around Arde-wan Kenobi as he ran with his boy from what he had seen, but one whisper of power caught him and stayed with him and told him what his child was. He held his boy closer then, and refused to believe, refused to think of anything at all but that he must protect his son, his Obi-wan, his Wreyn's only child, her special, special boy,



from the nightmare that engulfed him.

An uncertain dusk settled over the Moonscity of Hala. The starettes were destroyed. The sun was setting, as the mirror lake flamed with a haunting glow and the light of store-lamps that still worked reflected in the dust that hung in the air. This eventide was quiet, vulnerable.

A Jedi remembered being young there, sitting atop a broken wall, pulling his cloak free of its back ties and wrapping it about himself, not from bodily chill, but to create some barrier, however feeble, between himself and the ruins of war. This had been his first battle; he remembered wishing he were home.

The Sith were gone, their goal accomplished. There would be no surrender while even one last noble house commanded Xet's people. The young Jedi looked about him and tried to imagine the cities of Urt so torn--as well they had been within the millennium--but the image would not stay. Besides, it frightened him to think of home that way, and he was not happy with his fears.

Afraid! And he a Jedi! He pulled the cloak tighter, working to dismiss his self-pity, knowing full well the universality of that emotion. What did he, a warrior, have complaints about? What could he say to the folk caught alone and defenseless on the streets that could lessen their pain and distress? He closed his eyes and relaxed, allowing the flow of the city's hurts to enter him, reminding him of his reason for wearing the slender weapon at his hip.

A surge of emotion nearby brought his head up. Standing slightly, the cloak falling back from his suit of land armor, he felt the weary worry of a man burdened almost beyond bearing. He took a step forward. The man, slender and bowed over something...a child...in his arms, shuffled around the street corner.

"Hail to thee?" the Jedi called out softly, not to scare them.

The refugee stepped back a pace, almost turned. The Jedi reached out with a wave of calming reassurance he did not feel himself. What could he say to a father with a child most assuredly dead? He was about to repeat his greeting when he saw the man mouth the word "Jedi", and run toward him.

"Hold, hold, take care! Sir, you're tired, let me..." He met the man halfway and tried to quiet him, but the Vessan--or so he was signed by the emblem in his shoulder brooch--thrust the child at him, talking without stop.

"You help him! This is your business! You're the Jedi! Help him! He's a boy, just a boy. Your tricks have done this! He's my son,

my only child! You can't take him from me! Help him!"

The needs of the moment overcame the youth's shyness. He placed firm hands on the man's shoulders, then aside his cheeks. "Peace, gentlebeing, peace," said the Jedi, and it was as much a command as a suggestion. The two were even in height, and pale green Urtian eyes held the Vessan blue steadily. "Be calm. It is over and we continue."

Through the hysterics, the man recognized the procedure and closed his eyes, letting the assurance flow through him. The Jedi nodded in approval and stayed with him until control was his.

"And now, sir," he said gently, "what is wrong with the boy?"

The Jedi smoothed the fine dark hair on the child's head one more time. The boy was sleeping now; the father calm. But the young knight was thinking quickly, reviewing what he had just experienced, not quite believing it.

He knew the lost wandering the boy had stumbled into; he was familiar with that land and had helped others from it often enough. Each trainee who tested his limits beyond the advice of his teachers fell into that darkness. The powers of the Force were many and varied; and not all were simple tricks, or techniques which were performed at command and without danger.

But how had this boy found his way there? And more, how had he kept going once lost? He could not have been prepared for the loneliness, for the awe-filled eternity. Where was the madness the Jedi would have thought to find had anyone presented such a case to him in class? A boy, no more than a child...and despite the panic and pain that had betrayed his age, the Jedi had felt as comfortable with this--babe!--as if he had been one of the Jedi's own.

The father hovered. Standing, the Jedi passed the boy to the other's arms. "He'll be all right," he assured the Vessan. "He'll be anxious, though, and should not be left alone. If you'll just wait here, I'm certain my colleagues could..."

A fierce look flashed on the Vessan's face. He backed up. "His mother will know what to do. Thank you. We don't need any help now." He hesitated. "What's wrong?"

Damning the betrayal of his reaction, the Jedi held out a hand in a gesture of sympathy. "Your son's mind was open to me, sir. I saw...sir, the boy's mother is dead. It was in his memory. I...if you will just wait here, I'm sorry it has to be this way...but the boy is...I can bring someone who will know what to do with..." Panic reappeared on the man's face. "Nothing is wrong, trust me," the Jedi repeated hurriedly. He felt very awkward and inexperienced







again. "My squad leader is skilled in such matters; she will see to your comfort. Please wait."

The man said nothing. Warily, he sat on an open window sill.

"I'll be back shortly," said the Jedi. "Please, wait."

\*

The sky is darkening here, too, with a coming afternoon storm. The room is dim about us and my host stares out the windows at the lowering clouds.

"And you saw no one after finding Obi-wan?" I ask, knowing full well the truth for it has become part of another Jedi's repertoire of Obi-wan Kenobi stories.

His chin lifts; he considers, then shakes his head. "No one," he says with finality. "We didn't need anyone. Obi was simply exhausted. Of course, he was. I could have lost him that day...to the Sith...to the..." He brings his hand to his forehead again, as if to wipe the memory clear. "I was afraid. You must understand, I was...concerned. He...he shouldn't have been able to do that... He was just a boy...if the Jedi had taken him, could even they have imagined what he might..." He winces, his palm flat against his temple, a tremble in the hand barely noticeable, and the thought is gone forever. "He might have gotten himself killed," he says instead, turning to face me. "Killed in some battle he was also too young for, like the twins; like that young Jedi we--"

"What young Jedi?" I jumped at one last chance for complete revelation, but the moment is past. He is caught up in the fiction he has devised for himself. So close he came in his question: can anyone truly imagine what a being with the talents of Obi-wan Kenobi is capable of? But, no, he passes this by, transmuting the truth into a less terrifying lie.

I say nothing and listen on. Perhaps he is right. Perhaps it is better this way, though I maintain the fantasy through silence. I could do otherwise, but...ah, but where is the parent who has profited from knowing he is afraid of his child?

And I will not correct Obi-wan's misunderstandings of his parents' apprehension, for where is the child who needs to know he is so feared?

\*

Night had come for the first time in centuries to Moonscity. Jedi glows bobbed by the

street corner where the man and the child had appeared. They were gone. The young knight paced the area, stopping a few steps from the Hieldie who had accompanied him. "Damn," he muttered, resting his fists on his hips. "They were right here! I should have expected it; the father was so skittish."

"Hevilet," the catten purred raggedly to cover her scepticism, "perhaps you are anticipating too--"

"Rshari, I know what I read in the boy. And now I've lost him!"

His squad leader rubbed a paw across her jaw in a gesture of fatigue. She wrapped her other arm about the Jedi's shoulder, resting her elbow aside the smaller human's neck. "Hevi, Hevi, you have not lost anything. Shall we go back now? I am most sore-padded tired." She purred again at the expression of frustration on her young companion's face. "If he is as you say, Hevilet, he will return. One day, you may believe it, he will find his way to us."

Hevilet shrugged and followed his leader back over the rubble that lay in their way. Atop the low wall that lead from the hangars, he paused and looked back.

"Hevilet!"

"I was just looking."

"Hevilet."

"Coming."

The Jedi and his glows disappeared behind the wall then and the night was quiet and dark once again.

END TALE THE FIRST

*Lorleyneesi*

